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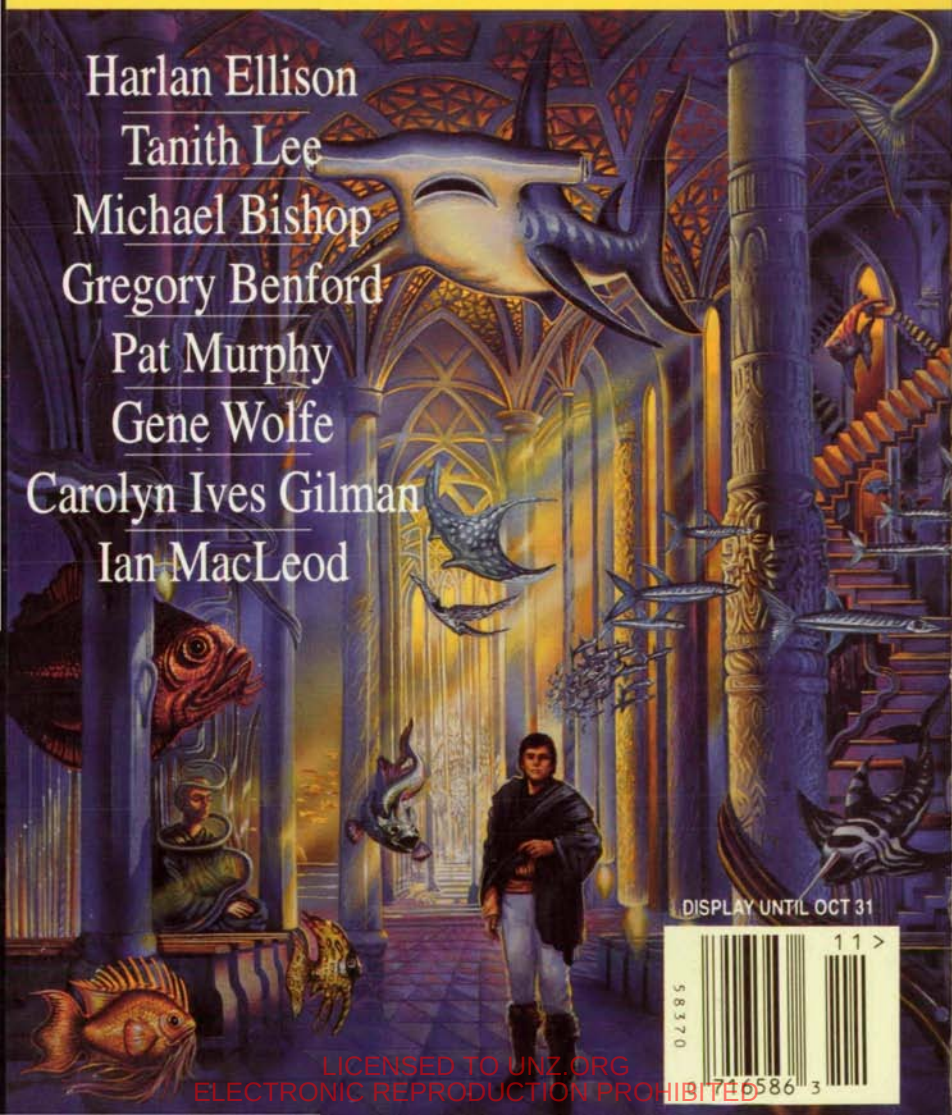

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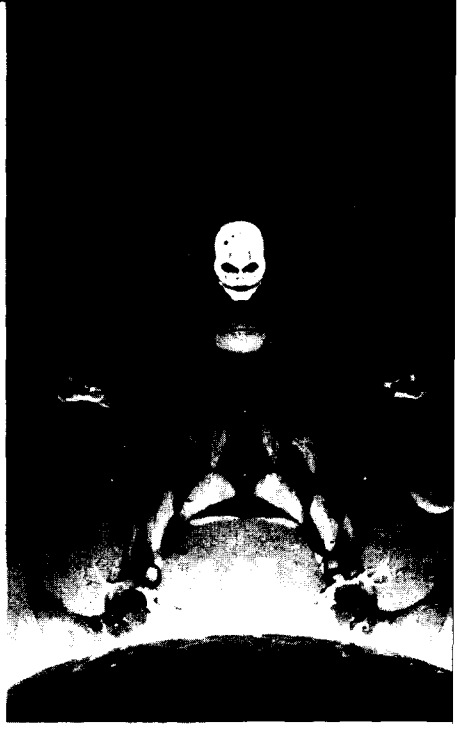

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
October/November • 47th Year of Publication

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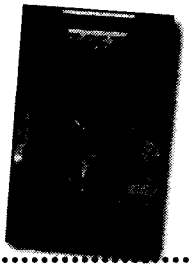

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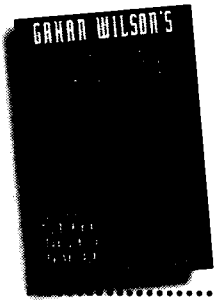

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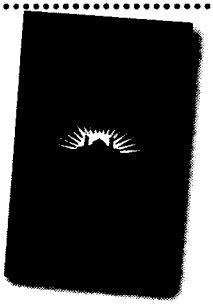

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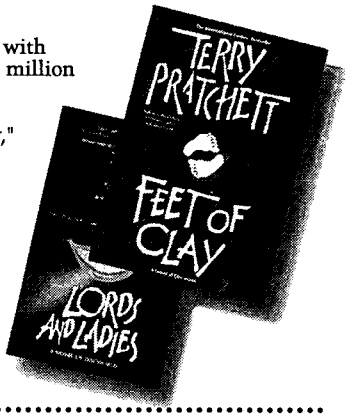

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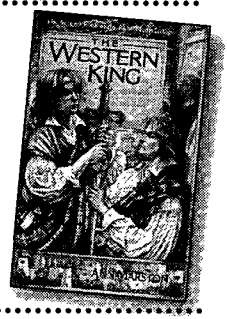

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN JULY, I began a series of editorials which I am loosely calling "A Reader's Guide to Book Publishing." They were inspired by an article in our state newspaper, *The Oregonian,* written by a woman whose job it is to write about the arts and books. It was clear from the article that she didn't know much about publishing itself, or even how she fit into the great scheme.

Reviewers have a role in the business of book publishing. Sometimes the role is important, and sometimes it isn't as important as it seems. This editorial will focus on the role of perception in book publishing — perception as it relates to the people who make their living or their reputation as critics, gadflies, or service guides.

First, let's discuss reviews as they relate to fiction in general. Most reviews are free ads or a buyer's guide, designed to intrigue a wavering reader into buying a book. Some book editors will argue that review excerpts placed in the front matter of a book don't influence a reader to buy; other editors argue the opposite. I personally think a lot of good reviews, quoted without ellipses, do influence a purchasing decision.[1]

Reviews in certain well-placed publications, however, will influence more than the reader. A good review in *Publisher's Weekly* will often spark foreign publishers' interest in a book. A featured review in *The New York Times Book Review* will often get bookstores to reorder immediately — or to order in a copy of the book. Good reviews in all the right publications will give a book "legs" — provoke sales, start word of mouth, or even arouse Hollywood's interest.

[1]The ellipsis is a very valuable tool to the promotion department. For example, a review might say: "Jones is a talented writer whose abilities are wasted here. *Sandcastles* is a shallow but fast-paced novel with but a single virtue: it ends quickly." The promotion department might quote the review this way: "Jones is a talented writer.... *Sandcastles* is...fast-paced..." Or, if they want to avoid too many ellipses, they'll use: "Jones is a talented writer..."

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"The right publications" can vary from book to book, even genre to genre. But if a book is going to sell well based on critical acclaim, it needs to impress *The New York Times, Publisher's Weekly, Kirkus,* several major newspapers like *The Chicago Tribune*, or major magazines, like *The New Yorker*. A literary novel (which is usually first published in a tiny hardcover run) benefits from good reviews in literary journals like *The Missouri Review* or *The Kenyon Review* in three ways: first, the reviews might provoke a mass market paperback sale; second, the reviews might give the author a higher advance and a wider audience for his next book; and third, the reviews sometimes influence juries of major literary awards *to read the book*. The literary market is different from the other genres in that a literary novel must work harder to survive. Even though literary novels have more prestige, that's often all they have. They sell minuscule numbers of copies usually to a highly educated subset of readers who read, not for enjoyment, but to garner some of the same prestige that is heaped on the book.[2]

The romance genre also uses reviews differently than the other genres. Romance has developed its own industry publication that works as an advance review guide for reader and bookseller alike. Most books are sold to the bookstore two months before the book appears, and in *Romantic Times*, reviews often appear about two months ahead. That encourages readers to ask for the book at a local bookstore, and it encourages booksellers to order. *Romantic Times* never gives a bad review, only a not-so-good review. It functions as a pat-on-the-back buddy-buddy guide to upcoming releases, and it does help sales.

I am not sure how reviews work in the mystery genre or in the western genre, so I won't discuss them here. Because this is a science fiction and fantasy magazine, I will spend some time on the ways that reviews work in this field.

F&SF runs four different review columns. Because of our long lead-time, we're often reviewing books that are no longer on the stands. Our reviews become useful in promoting mass market editions of hardcover books, in selling the author's next book, and as an information guide for readers. Because of our lead-time, we can be little

[2]That prestige often comes from being one of a select few people who "relate to" or "understand" the book in question. The book functions as a confirmation of the reader's intelligence and good taste rather than as a piece of entertainment with which to while away a few hours.

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else. But I also see our reviews in the magazine falling into two categories:

First, we have a literary essay.[3] In the literary essay, the reviewer examines a book as part of a genre or a literary field. It's all right for the reviewer to give away plot points or to examine aspects of the book such as theme because the reviewer is doing critical analysis, placing the book in a context. The reviewer rarely examines a book he doesn't like because there is no point to it: the reviewer in the literary essay is trying to compare good to classic, not compare bad to classic.

Secondly, we have a consumer's guide.[4] Because we have limited space, we try to avoid books that don't work, or books the reviewers hate. Better to point out books that a reader should search out for a good time.

You'll note that we rarely waste time with a bad review. We have published some, but fewer since I've become editor. The other major change we've made since I've become editor is this: I do not allow our reviewers to review each other's novels or the novels of any columnist in the magazine. I often hire reviewers with widely divergent opinions (figuring that our readers have widely divergent tastes) and I do not want the pages of this magazine to become a battleground in which Reviewer A uses the work of Reviewer B in attack against Reviewer B's literary philosophy.

I put our review philosophy up front so that you know where I am coming from in this next section. Science fiction, the genre category, has its elites, many of whom control the newsmagazines and review columns of the field. These people consider themselves the Guardians of the Faith. The Faith has a canon and a series of tenets. While the Faithful sometimes argue about the canon (I can safely say that it includes Heinlein, Asimov, and Tolkien), they rarely argue about the tenets.

Some of the tenets are: 1) any sf book that sells well appeals to the lowest common denominator and is not worth reviewing; 2) Military sf (except for Heinlein) is bad; 3) Fat fantasy novels (especially series and trilogies) are bad (unless written by Tolkien); 4) Space opera is bad; 5) Good sf is character-driven and dystopic; 6) Good fantasy is

[3]Rob Killheffer's column is always in this category. Charles de Lint's is sometimes and so is Michelle West's.

[4]The Brief Reviews are designed to be a consumer's guide. Charles de Lint and Michelle West often function this way as well, pointing out books you might have otherwise missed.

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contemporary and character-driven, with a magic-realism feel; and so on.

The Guardians of the Faith also choose the successors to the greats. There is an approved list of good writers, often a group that has come up together, and is writing fiction like that mentioned in points five and six above. Any divergence from the tenets is grounds for exclusion, or rabid literary debate often disguised as reviews.

What this attitude has done is polarize and marginalize science fiction. Writers who should be embraced by this field are either never invited in (such as R.L. Stine) or abandoned once they become successful (like Dean Koontz). The writers who remain and are praised by the literary guardians of the field are often perceived by publishers as sf writers only — writers whose work will never appeal to the larger group of readers and therefore will never sell more than 30,000 copies.

How is this important to you as an sf reader? It is important in two ways. First, if you find your way to the small circulation sf (and general) news and review magazines, realize that behind many of these publications' veneer of objectivity is an agenda. Writers who write space opera or military sf are usually not reviewed. Writers whose politics differ from that of the faithful are also not reviewed, or are reviewed with an eye toward the political difference. Most readers of the newsmagazines don't realize these squabbles are occurring, and so can't understand why so-and-so who was once considered a top-notch writer is suddenly getting bad reviews or no reviews at all.

The other way it influences what you read is this: instead of promoting good fiction and using reviews and critical acclaim to get books on the shelves that might not otherwise be there, these internecine squabbles diminish the positive function of the reviewer. By promoting difficult-to-read books that have (and often deserve) marginal sales, the sf newsmag-azines reinforce to the publishing community the oft-repeated theory that "good sf doesn't sell." This means the publishing slots for any kind of sf will diminish, and the category itself will dwindle.[5] When that occurs, the development of the genre

[5]Evidence points to the fact that the category isn't dwindling, it's moving on and reappearing under new labels. Books that are published with science fiction on the spine are becoming harder to sell. Books marketed as bestsellers or mainstream with sf tropes, like a Michael Crichton novel, are selling extremely well.

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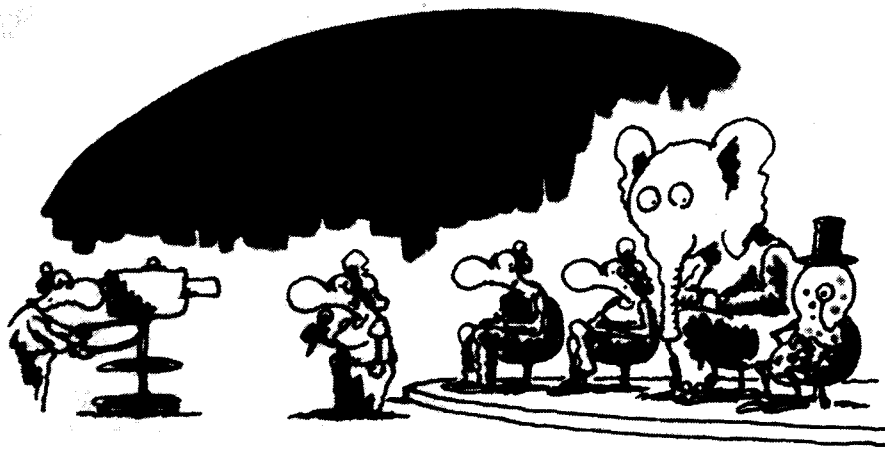
stalls. The new writers have no place to publish a first novel, no place to go to even garner reviews.

What I have done here is bring this series of essays full circle. They began when I read a column by a woman who should have known the details of publishing and didn't. The reason that angered me is because she writes for a major newspaper whose reviews often have influence in publishing decisions. I would wager she — and her paper — fail to understand the implications of what they write. So many reviewers do. So many work from personal grudge or vendetta, and even more write from an even more difficult position. Many reviewers are failed writers, and are determined to pick flaws with *any* published novel. It's difficult for you, as a reader, to know which reviewers to trust. I suggest you pay attention over time to either a reviewer's byline, or in the case of unbylined reviews, to a publication's attitude. If you note that the moment a writer becomes successful, he gets trashed, avoid that publication. If you note objectivity, a willingness to admit that good literature can exist in both the bestseller and the marginal book, then you're in the hands of a publication that understands fiction.

Perhaps this fact, more than any other, explains why publishers only allow certain publications' reviews to influence publishing decisions, and why reviews — although they have proliferated — have less and less significance.

Next month, I'll answer your questions about publishing, and in January, we'll move on to new topics and new ideas.



"Secret Crushes... Today on Joanie."

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Ian MacLeod has published a number of wonderful stories in F&SF, *the most recent being "Nina-With-the-Sky-in-her-Hair" in our December issue. His stories are always different and thoughtful.*

About "Verglas," he writes, "I'm no climber, but I love stories of the wilderness; places where man isn't really needed or wanted, or has never been. And I've often looked up on my rambles across the hillier bits of the British countryside at the little dayglow-orange spider-people, slowly moving up a cliff-face. I guess the other part of the story hinges on what it is and isn't to be human; and how much we want to be human anyway. I — certainly in my darker moments — would probably take the chance the family in the story are offered; and if the world were a better place than it is now, if the future was here and we were still, ultimately, just us, *my feelings would remain the same."*

Verglas

By Ian R. MacLeod

THE FIRST WEEK AFTER Marion and the kids left I kept busy around the base, clearing tunnels, tidying up their chambers, storing things away, taking in great gulps of memory. But even then I felt restless. I spent a long afternoon digging their graves by hand; trying to lose myself in working up a sweat, whacking the hot blade of the shovel through gray-tufted tundra into the course peat below. Then I went to seal up their bodies for the last time. They looked so beautiful lying inside their half-open sleepsuits with the stillfield showing through their veins in tiny threads of gold. I kissed Marion's mouth and her cool white breasts. I touched the bruise that still showed on Robbie's forehead from the day he fell chasing the silver-backed pseudocrabs soon after we landed. I drew my fingers through Sarah's pale yellow hair. There was a faint but palpable sense that, even though it was so slow as to be undetectable, they were still breathing. And despite all I knew and everything that we'd agreed, I felt that something of my family remained with me here. It was hard to believe

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that the decay of their bodies in Korai's acidic soil wouldn't destroy a lingering fragment. Not that I wanted to change things or go back, not that I regretted the decision we'd jointly made, but I knew that I couldn't bury them.

Next day as I walked out across the tundra to prepare the last quester for its journey across the mountains to explore Korai's far southern peninsula, I nearly stumbled into one of the long holes I'd cut. I spent that afternoon refilling all three, shoveling and then patting down and re-compacting the ground until all that was left was a faint disturbance of the sod that the growth of the slow-gathering summer would obliterate.

That evening, as always, I laid out new slabs of meat along the fissured table of rock at the east end of the canyon, steaming hot from the processor so they'd show up well on infra red. I'd genuinely expected Marion, Robbie and Sarah to return here the first few nights after they'd left. But with a week gone I'd decided that their staying away was really a positive sign; it showed they were managing to hunt and feed. By now I was just laying out the meat from habit. This deep and narrow rift between the mountains made a poor feeding ground, and Marion had always said that it made sense for them to start as they meant to go on, to get as far away as they could from their human bodies.

I sat on a rock with my powerpack set high to keep warm as the wind from the vast eastern range poured down around me in the blue gathering dark, waiting without much hope for Marion and Sarah and Robbie and thinking of the way things had been, enjoying the luxury of an undefined and unjustified melancholy. After all, it wasn't as though I was really losing them any more than I was losing myself. But there was Marion tossing Sarah in the clear spray of a forest rockpool back on Earth, her belly shining taught with Robbie who was yet to be born. And there was the night that we decided to make him, and the feel of snow and cold marvelous starlight pouring down through the trees. Yes, even then, Marion had loved the mountains.

Korai's sun Deres, long set from my sight, had painted the tips of the furthest mountains red when I sensed the gray beat of wings. I stood up quickly, feeling reality tingle around me once more, the sharpness of the wind breaking through the mingled taste of love and snow on Marion's skin. Those days were gone now. I was here on this planet and my ears and

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eyes were telling me that three shapes were drifting down from the grainy white cliffs that dropped from a desolate plateau. They seemed to shift and dance at the very edge of sight, drifting half-shadows or mere flakes of soot swirling on the sparse thermals. Scale is nothing here. As I caught the beat of pinions and the near-ultrasonic keening — part sonar, part language — there came, hazy and unbidden, the image of Sarah on a white beach by the blue ocean, her hair falling in salt tangles as she stooped along the shore to collect fishbones and shells. I pushed it away, an unwanted comparison, and concentrated on those shapes in the blackening sky, clearer to me now against the red-edged mountains, and real. One large, and two smaller. Although I still knew little enough about species identifers, it had to be Marion, Robbie, Sarah. They were the only ones.

I ran across the turf, trying to pull everything in, every sound and every sense, greedy to hold this moment — knowing that it would be soon gone. They swept over me once. Marion's larger shape darkened the already dark sky, then she slowed, circled, chittering to her offspring to keep aloft until she was sure that all was safe. There had to be an instinct for self-preservation, I supposed, and Marion was still Marion despite everything that had changed. She was always the one who had that extra sense of danger for our kids. That was why we'd decided she should go first.

I watched her finally settle on the table of rock. I saw her head pivot my way. I caught the faceted glint of her eyes. Then, with a lilting, hopping motion, she moved toward the meat. I could understand more easily now the point of that ugly metallic-sheened fur, her looped and whorled skin, that grayish-black coloring; she was almost a part of the twilight. And her movements were so quick; the way her jointed arms shot out, and how she kept her balance, her wings still outstretched, pushing against the wind, ready to lift and flee at any moment. A bright hot flash of fluid as her claws broke open the meat. Then, when she was finally sure that all was safe, she signaled to the children — *KAK KARR KIK KARR* — and they fluttered down with almost equal grace to join her. The wind beat and howled. They stooped and folded their wings. The glacier-strewn mountains shone in the distance.

It was over quickly, this moment that I'd almost given up hoping for. The fact was all — they were here and surviving — and the mere sight of them feeding was nothing that I hadn't witnessed a thousand times before

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in the simulations we'd run back on Earth. *KI KIK KARR*; a sound like stones knocking, then beating wings again, and the brief feral scent of fur and flesh. Marion the first to rise, to test — protective as ever — the return to their chosen element. Then Robbie and Sarah lifting as one, drawn by the wind. A mere process, it seemed to me, of letting go, a skyward falling. I tried to follow them with my eyes but the sky between the mountains had brimmed with night, showing only a last hint in the east. Three specks, laughing, chattering, singing. Swooping.

I walked back down toward the base, calling on the lights as I did so, watching the string of tunnels and canopies blossom and fan like so many paper lanterns. Too big for me, this place, now that I was on my own. And I was sure that whatever remote chance there had been that the integration of the creatures that my family had become might fail was already long-gone. Ducking the first of the air barriers, feeling the wind lessen, I sensed the smug emanations of the thought machines. They were already far into the next century, sniffing the wind, testing the air, communing with the questers, pushing things on and through, asking endless what-ifs, checking for implausible or non-existent ecological anomalies. But Marion and Robbie and Sarah would fit in. For us, Korai was perfect. There was a niche for a sky-borne predator that the indigenous species would never fill.

The nights on Korai are as long as the days. The planet sits upright in its axis to Deres and the seasonal shifts come from the passage and repassage of the dust belts that haze the space between. Somehow the local wildlife manage to keep track of the complex cycles of long and short winters, cold or savage summers, indeterminate half-autumns, endless springs. It caused, I remembered, one of the longest and most frustrating delays in configuring the new species. And the constant length of the periods of darkness was also a surprising barrier, even though the days are near as doesn't matter to Earth-standard. Night and day specializations don't seem to work here; you need to be able to see and function in either. The pseudocrabs that scuttle across the tundra each morning possess smaller versions of the eyes that Marion flashed at me before she started to feed. Polyhedral, with each facet wired independently to the brain, alternately set with focusing and filtering layers of polarized cones. When a good design works, you carry on using it.

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Marion came to me that night, as I'd half-expected she would. But it was hard to tell how much of it really was her, how much had been simply pushed through my sleepsuit by the thought machines, how much was my own pure imagination.

"I couldn't bury you," I said. "You're still here — your bodies, I mean. It seems gruesome, really, stupid. I know it was part of the deal we made."

"Did we?" she said, looking at me with her face smiling, forgetful. "Yes, I suppose we did. When you're in a body, it matters to you. But when you're not..."

"You don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind. You'll know what to do when the time comes."

"It can't be long now," I said. "The projections I've seen are as good as anything we hoped for."

"I could tell," she said. "Right away. That first day as soon as I took flight. When I saw the mountains and felt the roaring air. I wonder now whether I was ever properly human. Perhaps I was an eagle or something in some other life. Not that I believe in mumbo jumbo..."

"No." I stared at her. Her face hovering there in the darkness. *Mumbo jumbo.* Would it be better if I willed the dream to gain more substance? Would it be worse? What did I want anyway? Marion sitting beside me at that café by the Spanish Steps? Marion swimming deep through the coral, drawing me to her from the flickering shoals, our silver bubbles joining? Or Marion now. Marion perched on a mountaintop with all this world and the sky beneath her?

"What's it like?"

"I knew you'd ask that," she said. "I can't tell you really. But it's far more than the simulations. It's life. You'll just have to come and see."

"I mean — "

" — Of course," she continued, wild dream-light in her eyes, "it feels scary. It was everything Robbie and Sarah ever wanted, and for me it was just the plain unknown. But it's harder still for you. Bound to be — that was why I hesitated to leave you. You've seen it now. Both sides. Don't you remember they said that it's always most difficult for the one who stays behind...?"

"How are they? I mean Robbie, Sarah."

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"They're fine. We're all fine."

"I still love you."

She smiled. I watched the way her lips moved, the sharp clarity in her wide-set eyes. It all suddenly seemed like amusement at my quaint human ways. But she said it anyway, the way she always had — *I love you* — and at that point the dream faded and the sleepsuit softened and refolded itself around me and the thought machines withdrew. I was drifting in deep fathomless dark, alone.

I AWOKE NEXT MORNING feeling weary. Even after Marion had faded, I'd still been dreaming — unprompted and unaided — although whatever it was had gone too quickly for me to remember. Odd really, that so much of life slips by even as you live it. That was something Marion used to say. The thing about being human she most hated. Lying in my sleepsuit and with the taut canopy of my chamber gauzily lit with the gray Korain morning, I called up breakfast, then regretted doing so as my server stalked in. Another job that I should have done myself to help fill the long day I could feel stretching ahead of me. The prospect made me realize just how much, even though I'd ostensibly given up waiting, I'd actually been clinging to the hope that my wife and kids would show up one evening out of the sky. But although Marion hadn't said so specifically, the tone of her conversation had made it clear that she and Robbie and Sarah wouldn't come again. Not outside my dreams, anyway, and even inside them I knew that the warnings would soon be flashing, the thought machines trundling into my sleepy head in magnificent disguise to point out that I was in danger of starting to obsess. Not that I *was* starting to obsess. Not about Marion anyway. I believed every word she might have said. And believed, although she'd hardly mentioned them, that Robbie and Sarah were happy on this new planet too. They'd been elated at the prospect of changing from the start — more than eager to go — then puzzled and angry when Marion and I continued to worry over it. If we stay human, Sarah had said to me one evening when she was back from the shore barefoot with her rods and her nets, we're simply making the same decision in reverse. Can't you see that, Daddy? And look at us. It's not as though we humans are that exceptional. We can't fly, we can't swim very well, our limbs are weak and

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we've only got four kinds of taste receptor on our tongues. Of course, Sarah really did look exceptional to me with the sun in her eyes and salt in her hair, but it seemed unjust to expect her and Robbie to spend all their lives as mere humans when a hundred different worlds beckoned.

After breakfast that morning I thought, briefly, of folding away all the extra chambers and tunnels to save unnecessary power. But I realized that my motive was simply to make the base more right to my own scale, more long-lasting, more homely. And I knew, anyway, looking back at the base from the flat fissured rock that was quite astonishingly clean today (just a few shreds of skin and greasy stains marked with claw prints, a faint ripe ammoniac smell of something other than human), gazing down at the steel frames and the spun silver lines of fielding and the fluttering chambers and tunnels, that everything here would always be temporary.

Instead I spent the morning with the thought machines, hunched over a crystal emanator in a billowing chamber where the wind broke intermittently through the last of the fields, drawing in images from the questers. The signals from the furthest one were bouncing off two satellites now, far over the horizon. Korai is a wide planet, larger than Earth, but with a cold core and no tectonic movement. There's just this one great nameless continent; a world map in crystal. It's one of the main factors in the relative uniformity in life here. No marsupial freaks on Korai, no platypi or swimming birds or tree-climbing kangaroos or flying fish. No real intelligence either. Things might have been different if Korain life hadn't developed a replicating mode with enormous built-in redundancy, but the linked proteins even look chunky under a microscope, box-shapes of squared-off links and arches, the kind of genes a Victorian engineer might have come up with. A good planetary catastrophe like Earth's of 65 million years ago might still have pushed things on a different course. But Korai doesn't have comets or an asteroid belt. Funny, really, that we humans, with our tumbling-dice DNA, our fluctuating and meteorite-bombed planet, only realized how lucky we were when we found out what life was like on other worlds. Change and danger are the real stuff of species development.

I discovered that the furthest quester had now reached the lowlands on the costal edge. It's mostly swampland in those mid-latitudes, but still dominated by the air currents tossed around by the mountains. Hot rain

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pours, trees swoop and sway, swathes of reddish-slimed bog shiver and glisten. Hurricanes all the year round, and the life that I pulled in from the quester's transmission was slick, stooped, hurrying. This creature here, as I gazed through the quester's main lens in rain-tossed real-time, even looked like a folded umbrella. I chased and caught it with the quester's claws, to see if it actually unfolded. But silvery-marbled blood burst from the rent I'd made, dribbling with the rain into the mud. The thing was dead, destroyed by my own long-distance curiosity. So I made the puzzled quester scoop out a deepish brine-filled hole. And no, I didn't want ANALYSIS or PRESERVATION or AUTOPSY. When something is truly dead, I have no problem burying it.

I fixed lunch from the few remaining raw supplies, luxuries we'd brought with us from Earth. Picking out eggs and bread from the cooler, I noticed one last bottle of champagne at the back. What was it, I wondered, that we'd planned on celebrating? I opened out the flaps of the cooking chamber, set the fields to low and let the wind and the mountains roar. The sense of the mountains, anyway. I had to crane my neck up and out to see them. As the eggs thickened and the pan smoked and spat and the burner's blue fingers danced, I realized just how atavistic all this had become. I'd be making campfires next. But sitting outside afterward with a fork and a plate, making the most of Deres's brief appearance overhead through this strangely clouded sky, I still turned my powerpack up to keep warm — I mean, you can take these things too far.

I instructed the plate and the fork to destroy after finishing, and watched as they did that Dali-thing on a rock; drooping and fading. Another fragment of my supplies gone, slipping by like the hours and the days. Marion had been a little concerned about my being alone; how I'd cope with the isolation. I even guessed it was probably why she and the kids kept away once they'd changed — to give me the space I needed — although by now it was hard to read anything into their motives. The fact was, I was at least partly enjoying being alone. Sure, the days were hard to get through. But it was also nice just being here, just being me.

I wandered down along the southern arm of the chambers, stepping through into the dome where the questers had been kept. I had a vague memory that there was also something else in there — and I saw it squatting in the dim canopy light now that all the packing had been

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cleared. It looked almost like another quester, and was certainly derived from the same design. I was surprised I hadn't noticed it on the inventory, but then there'd been so many other things on my mind before we left Earth.

Obviously complicated — no use in simply calling it to activate. So I summoned up its frequency instead, and spent the next few minutes studying the manual. Until then it had seemed almost menacing, but now I absorbed the phraseology and understood what those forward and rear-facing gun-like things were for, the vicious studs on its belly and long stinger sticking out from its abdomen, why it had even more legs than a quester. Questers, after all, always take the easiest route. But this was a climber. And it was designed, like we humans, to seek out adversity.

I stepped into it, calling the bracelets to curl around my torso and limbs. Clumsily ripping the fabric around the exit porthole, I lumbered out across the tundra. My position within the climber on level ground was tilted, almost sitting up. I could sense busy metal snapping around me, although the thing had been designed in such a way that view was unrestricted. I strode faster, clattering over stones, squelching across bog along the whole dim length of the canyon. I'd explored it all before, the narrow confines of this shadowed place of waiting where scree and ancient cliff rose high on all sides, holding me in. I skimmed the edge of the lifeless lake. I hopped with easy grace onto the fissured rock of the feeding table. *Tip tap. Scrape scrape.* The manual was good, quick, easily accessible. Help menus sprang up into my mind before I'd even decided I needed them. The trick was to use the climber's limbs without higher brain involvement. To think WALK as you would just think *walk* normally, or STOP or RUN or REACH or CRAWL. Even on that first afternoon I was running, jumping, leaping.

I felt happy and tired that night. I called up a meal from the processor in my chambers; chicken korma and nan bread followed by amaretti biscuits and coffee, the kind of good, rich and uncomplicated food that I felt I deserved. Only a task-checking routine from the thought machines just as I was sinking into the curry-dipped nan finally reminded me that it was time to put out the meat. I compromised by contacting one of the outer sensors, and listened through the thought machines to the endless rustling howl of the wind. But that night my family didn't come.

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* * *

I dreamed I was flying through bright clouds, feeling the wind — now a complex element, a rich hidden tapestry woven with the taste of snow and air and sunlight. Everything was so sharp, so clear. I was lifting, falling, climbing. I was here at last. Truly *here*. And Marion was nearby, swooping over a great greenish-rimed cornice, ice pluming from her wings as she caught the air that came in a deep-throated roar from the depths of a valley.

"This is it!" she shouted as we leapt and fell through the sky, her voice still human in my dream despite the beating pinions, the jaws, the claws. "This is everything. Look..."

We'd risen far higher than I'd imagined — borne aloft without trying. The air tasted thin, clear and cool. I knew that the whole mountain range — all of Korai — was mine, spread out below me. I flexed my claws and tumbled, spinning and laughing. Dense rainbow-threaded clouds fanned and shifted far below. Colors my poor human eyes had never seen. Senses I'd never imagined. Marion was close to me now, her wings slowing. Then I felt her claws on my back, the loose heat of her breath, the pulling weight of her body dragging me down through the bright sky.

"I love you," she said, her voice screaming as we fell.

I awoke and lay staring up from my sleepsuit at the canopy, listening to a sharp keening that was no more than the Korain wind howling down from the crystal peaks of the mountains. *This is everything. Look...* In the simulations, I'd always found that I needed some final leap of faith to see what she meant. In life, too. But now Korai was becoming ever more marvelous, brighter. This planet, the great frozen peaks. Those mountains.

I set about using the climber in earnest next day. After loading more detailed maps of the local area, and with the help of the climber's own intelligence, I selected a route to the southeast. It involved a scramble from the gorge up the white crystalline scree beside the lake, then ten kils of lumbering along the dry bed of a meltwater stream to a five hundred meter peak. Five hundred meters doesn't seem like much in your head — not when you're three thousand up already — but looking at the sheer face of the mountain gleaming against the sky was another matter. The

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climber's lenses zoomed and scanned, searching for feasible routes across the fissured crystal then flashing them into my eyes. The difficulty-grading was higher than I'd imagined from the satellite map, but at my command the climber began to work crossways toward the deep cleft of a chimney then boosted itself up through the crevices where the wind shrieked and eddied. The climber was methodical, working multi-pitch, shooting out spindles of wire ahead that buried and fused into the rock, testing the weight of the anchors, squatting to plant rivets beneath us, roping hexes into the cracks, taking the slack, testing, belaying, moving on. It finally hooked over onto a wide sheltered ledge where the light of Deres shone faint but warm, as if in reluctant benediction, through the hurrying clouds.

Something buzzed against me as I softened the climber's bracelets and clambered out onto the ledge. I batted at it unthinkingly. Through sheer luck I actually caught the thing and held it in my palm, feeling incredible lightness, brittle fur, puffed and trembling flight bladders. I reopened my hand, and watched smiling as it rose and fluttered, quickly gone against the swelling haze.

I could feel the cold, feel the wind. I was an explorer, a discover. I turned up my powerpack and reached inside the climber's harness for a pair of heated gloves. Then, grabbing an overhang, feeling an odd tingling pull in my belly, I leaned out to look down at the drop. I quickly drew away, my boots pressed hard against the rock. Not that I was scared, not exactly. But the space. The blue hurrying air. It just wasn't something I'd prepared for. I swallowed oxygen tablets, hauled myself back into the climber, blanked out its help manual, and prepared to move on.

Glinting flecks of opalescent light. Deres blurring rainbows through the dust belts in a clear sky. LIFT. The climber straining, motors whining. BOLT. Sparks flinging from the rocks. PULL. Vertical, then an overhang, the wires spooling out and the ground distant as the sky: jagged, hazy. Moving the front right claw to JAM. Then up. And up, up. That solid perpetual moment of effort. I was in control now, my own muscles tensing as the climber tensed, my eyes searching each millimeter, each crack, each tiny chip of two billion years of frost erosion. Then a burst overhead, explosive as the detonation that had embedded the bolt, and the mountain tipped away from me in cloudburst of shards. I was falling, then jerked and

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held; spinning. My vision swarmed over stone, peak, ground, horizon, sky. The line I'd strung across the mountain was still holding. I looked around, willing my mind to adjust, to find an up and a down, but even as I tried to move the climber's front mandibles and haul myself back, the machine's own defaults kicked into place filling the air with smoke and sulfur, shooting out multiple ribbons of fresh bolts. Within a moment, without even having to will it, I was safely cradled.

I finally got back to my canyon in darkness and called up the base's homely lights. That night I didn't follow my usual practice of invoking a movie or a book from the thought machines. I just lay there, remembering the day; drawing myself up that mountain with the wind and the rock and the sun. The feeling of being astride the final ridge that led to the peak, and the timid fluttering shoal of Korain flyers. Their tiny blunt snouts, moist faceted eyes, puffed orange bladders, fluttering fins. Like the flashing coral fish that Marion and I had once swum through...

"What you did was dangerous," Sarah told me in my dreams. "I can understand you wanting to use that climber, Daddy. But you're inexperienced, you mustn't suppress the defaults."

"I suppose it takes time to learn," I said. We were sitting in a high place. Some world or other, too beautiful and hazy to be truly seen, lay spread out in glory beneath us. I smiled at her. What was the point in arguing? Sarah was like all kids. She loved being superior, telling me the right and the wrong.

"Then come and join us, Daddy. Come and join us now."

I looked at her. I was sure the moment before that she'd been human. But now there were facets to her eyes. A gray membrane fluttered in her throat through which she somehow spoke.

"I thought I saw you today," I said. "When I was up on the last ridge. Three specks to the east. Those highest peaks. Would that be right? Is that where you are?"

"Are you looking for us, Daddy? Is that why you're climbing? You'll never get up there in that clumsy machine. You know how to find us. Just change. Look at me. It's easy..."

I watched as Sarah's pinions unfurled and her wet jaws parted, wondering whether she could possibly understand my vague human needs. But this was what we had wanted. This was it. The freedom of this

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clear new planet, the joy of the hunt and the skies. This was it. To be here. To be real. So what was the matter with me now? Why was I holding on?

I SET OUT AGAIN with the climber the next morning. The sole dissatisfaction of the day before had been that the peak, so real and majestic as I climbed, had finally revealed itself as but a doorstep to the range beyond — not even reaching the snow line.

With help from the climber and satellite projections, I was able to work out a three-day route that would take me deep into the range. I collapsed some spare chambers, ordered food and fluid and clothes from the processor, oxygen tablets and an extra sling for the climber to hold it all. I wanted to go further, higher. It was a warm day, scented with metallic wafts of Korain sap. The day-flowers were unfolding, their glittering spinners catching the wind.

Up the scree slope, then along the dry riverbed, around the first day's mountain in the clear light of a dust-rainbowed sun. And on. I wasn't searching for another false triumph of some minor peak. All I wanted was that range, barely glimpsed through rearing black facets of obsidian, but sensed already in the cold wind from the glaciers that ground the jeweled dust filling this riverbed.

I camped that night in shelter of a crag at the edge of the snowline. I swallowed oxygen tablets before I unfolded my sleepsuit, but still my throat was raw, my chest was tight, my limbs sore, my heart hammering. Was it the thinness of the air? Or was it fear? Cold? Excitement? But I was nearing, stone on stone, rock on rock, crest on crest, the living heart of this crystal planet, the great range that seen from space was a white diadem stretched around Korai's girth. Yes, on. Toward Marion, Robbie, Sarah. In my dreams, and already far from the thought machines, I willed them to come.

I saw Robbie slippery and new. I saw him at Marion's breast, and then creamy waves beating over coral. I saw a sunset though palm leaves.

"We've got to go," Marion said, sitting there in her sarong beside the shore. There were dancers on the beach beside the waves, and the throb of drums. All the kids were like little savages out there in the sudden tropic darkness, Robbie and Sarah amongst them.

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"What's wrong with all this?" I asked.

Marion looked at me. The clear whites of her eyes. Her moonlit fingers moved impatient on the table, long and slim and lean. I felt trim and relaxed from this endless holiday, although my body was hardly my own; undeserved, really, after all I'd drunk and eaten, and the age to which I was getting, the little that I had done.

"What do you say we take a skimmer to Shell Island tomorrow?" I asked. "Sarah could bring her nets. You know how she loves fishing. That guy I met on the quay says the mock-lobsters out there are — "

Marion waved it away. "Sure. Tomorrow. But what about next week? Next year?"

"It'll come."

She said, "That's it exactly," and a warm breath of sea wind lifted the hair from her shoulders, and I thought of her already in some ship, some spacecraft, sailing away from me. "I have just one life. One Sarah, one Robbie. One *you*, goddammit. We die, you know. We *die*. That's the one fact that still remains. I don't want to waste what's left between just being simply..."

"Happy?"

"Happy." She nodded. "Yes. Happy. Is that all you want? Think it over. Listen to what I've said."

In my dreams, I listened. But it was too late. That night by the shore had gone, the decision had been made. Happy. Human. Not happy. Not human. Death. Change. Time... Next morning as I broke camp, as I ascended and searched, as the blue-black walls of the glaciers grew around me and wind bit and chilled, I willed Marion to show herself to me.

A ravine. Each time, another barrier, seemingly this whole planet crisscrossed by fractures, tumbling narrow and dark yet easily forded by the little wire bridges made by the climber. By the end of that second day I was finally up in Korai's main biosphere, amid those marbled clouds that moved not quite as the wind pushed them. The smaller grazers were a common sight now that I was up on the snows of the great range; they hung fearless in the air, fluttering and drifting as I shot out icescrews and drew karabiners in blinding flurries of spindrift. Red and blue, fat and thin, some with barbed fins. I climbed through their pastures, great gray-odored clouds that suddenly billowed around me, tasting of new soil and copper

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and mushrooms. Less often I saw bigger creatures etched against the rainbowed whiteness. Mostly flyers the size of my outstretched palms, although one I discovered was rockbound, a fronded mouth like a blue-lipped clam that puffed a steamy breath at me as I pulled over an overhang.

This was Korain high summer and the light of Deres was warm; dribbling water ice formed extravagant cornices and pillars when it froze in solid sweeps of shadow. The higher I climbed, the less white the snow became. I thought at first that it was a trick of the marbled clouds, but scooping it in my hands I saw that almost every frozen crystal was alive, pricked with green, blue, amber.

On the long afternoon of that day's climb it became obvious that the climber was stretching its abilities. To get to a ridge that led upward in one jaggedly promising sweep, I had to traverse a long cliff that hung exposed in a thousand meters of space — not that nine hundred less or more would have made any difference had I fallen. Warmed then cooled by the wind that poured up from the glacier below, the rock had a thin coating of ice called verglas; something new to me — and not, if the warning flags in my head were anything to go by, greatly favored by the climber. Huge plates of it came creaking off as I moved, shattering into blades that stung my face and hands. *Tip-tap. Scrape-scrape.* It was dangerous, frustrating work. Just millimeters beneath this ice crust, clearly visible, lay good solid rock. Nooks and jams and crevices that would have given technically easy climbing. For the first time, breathing hard, the outer reaches of my body beginning to slow and stiffen in this endless wind despite pulling on the powerpack's reserves, I was truly scared, shooting bolts into the half-cracked ice that the climber gave a fifty percent chance of holding. I glared at the cliff face, the thin patina holding me away from hard solid rock, keeping me from everything real. I wanted to smash, destroy this treacherous barrier. But the verglas was my world — it was everything. *Tip tap, scrape scrape.* I tested the surface again and was about to move on and up when I caught a movement at my back. I twisted my head and saw a Korain life form bigger than anything I'd seen before, a double orange sphere bobbing on the wind like a fishing buoy, sucking and blowing its way along. A joke, really, that something so amiable and stupid should be free to wander the sky...

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Suddenly there was another movement. A shadow came over me, making me tense in expectation of an icefall. But it was too fast, too big, swooping like a black dart. The Korain creature didn't have time to react. Its twin spheres crumbled in a bright spray as the predator swept down, and then — barely slowed by the weight of its catch — was instantly rising, soaring up over the cliff and out of my sight.

I shook my head.

Marion, Robbie, Sarah.

This is everything. Look...

Slowly, still feeling the pull of the drop, I traversed the verglas cliff, and finally, gratefully, dug the climber's mandibles into the hard spine of the ridge on the far side. A few hundred meters up from there, tinted blood-red, I could see a snow-scooped col that promised sheltered ground, and the route that the climber flashed up as EASY. Easy.

THE FABRIC of my chamber was oddly dark when I awoke next morning. Outside, my feet sank into soft crystal. The whole world seemed newly white — or almost. An opalescent mist hung in the air, veiling the snow-softened crags that I was planning to ascend.

I ate breakfast, collapsed and packed the chambers and shook the snow from the climber's limbs. Ascending the drifts to look over the edge of the col and take my bearings, I breathed the air, salt-ranged from the scatters of life that this morning seemed to have diffused this whole mountainside. And overhead, enormous yet half-real, swarming in and out of the mists, there were glimpses of crags and flutings, ice-cliffs and gullies. Eagerly, following the thin red line across the rainbowed white that the climber laid before me, I began my crosswise ascent of the vast snow-slope that lay ahead of me.

After an hour of easy going, I came into sight of the mouth of a cave, a clear gap of shadow against the rainbowed incline. I traversed toward it, digging and hardening a bollard in a peak of snow to make a belay as a precaution. The mist had closed in when I glanced back toward it, but that hardly seemed to matter — and a cave was a rare formation on Korai.

I had climbed a few more steps when I saw claw prints in the snow. The outer digits were webbed and the inner claw made a deeper indenta-

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tion. The climber made its own marks as I followed the prints up toward the cave, seeing how they skipped and faded as Marion and Sarah and Robbie took flight. I looked up again at the looming mouth as the snow slid in hissing plumes beneath me. The cave remained dark, but I knew from the simulations that they were unlikely to need shelter in the warm heart — to them, at least — of this Korain summer.

I called on the climber's lights as I entered the cave. *Tip tap. Drip drip,* the mandibles touching bare wet stone. It was warm in here, and a faint but definite fog seemed to emanate, something more than my own breath or condensation. Boulders and wet rock gleamed around me. It was a steep upward climb. I saw crystalline shapes, metallic colors. I paused, tensing the limbs of the climber against the slippery drop, remembering the steaming mouth of the clam-like creature, wondering if some unexpected super-variant dwelled inside this cave. But that was absurd, and still I was curious.

The climber's front mandibles snagged on something dangling from the ceiling. Expecting a stalactite, I turned up the lights, but the substance broke loose in mucus-like strands that I saw also fronded from floor and walls and ceiling ahead. And what was this ball of threaded tissue, softly pulsing? There was something about all of this — the most bizarre thing of all, really — that made it seem familiar. I stared. *Ahhhh. Haaa.* A warm breeze was drawing me closer, pulling me away, and there was a muted thumping that sounded like a heart.

I took a step further, careful now with the climber's mandibles. The tunnel grew too narrow for it to get beyond here, but perhaps if I went unaided, got out... Then I heard a shrill screaming behind me; *KRREE KAARR* as if the wind had cracked open the mountain.

I lost footing as I spun the climber around. Scrabbling, trying to fire a steadying blot into the rock face, I tumbled over. Held tight within the climber's protective cage, my head spinning, I saw something large and black clamp itself over the two raised front mandibles. Multi-faceted eyes momentarily caught in the wash of the climber's lights, then were gone again.

The climber skidded and tumbled down the loose wet rocks of the cave. My left leg snagged in a flare of pain. Then a burst of dazzling light and rainbowed plumes and the dry mineral taste of Korain snow filling my

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mouth as I willed the climber to HOLD. But still there was nothing but tumbling whiteness. Then came the sudden tug of the belay.

I lay there. I could hear the climber's dented mandibles ticking and the soft plop of something — probably hydraulic fluid — dripping. Twisting my head, I saw that I was partly right. Some of it was yellow oil. The rest was blood, steaming and melting the snow. I looked up at the sky where a thousand black flecks seemed to be swarming. I blinked: — but Marion had gone. Just drifting marbled clouds. And all I could hear was that soft drip, and the whistle of the wind, and the snow beneath me creaking.

I moved one of the inner claws LEFT then RIGHT, unsnagging the line. Slowly, discovering that the main mandibles on the right side hung useless, I hauled the climber back up the rope toward the belay, and saw when I reached it how the harness had almost worn through the pillar of ice.

The snow slope stretched wide and featureless above and below me until it dissolved in rainbowed mist. CUT, SCOOP, MOVE. I began to work my way back toward the col I had left that morning. I had to make a conscious effort not to move my left leg in sympathy when I issued a command; there was a surge of pain each time I forgot. I checked the clock again. Four hours. Well past midday. Already the snow was darkening in long scoops and serrations. And there at last, suddenly picked out in clear outline by Deres's sinking flare, were the steps I'd made in the snow that morning.

I followed them and finally slid down into the col, shivering with relief and drawing great billows of warmth from my powerpack. The dull ache in my leg flared into something wildly brighter as I hauled myself out of the climber, unhooked the sling of supplies from its underside, and called up its still-functioning lights. It seemed ridiculous to put up the canopies by hand but I started work anyway, sucking in agonized breaths as I willed my powerpack to send out more opiates. Once the pain had reduced, my left leg was capable of holding me up. It was quite clever, really, the way that the blood had frozen around the leggings to make a kind of splint.

When I had finally dragged my body inside the warmth of my narrower-than-usual chamber, I took a knife and zipped it down the seam

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of my stiffened legging. There was a jagged gash across the outside of my calf, with glimpses of white inside that might or might not have been bone. But nothing seemed broken. I moulded artificial flesh and pressed it down over the wound. There was a brief agonizing flare as it stuck and welded — then nothing, bliss.

I forced myself to drink and eat, then gulped down oxygen tablets. I lay back. I could still feel commands running in my head, CUT SCOOP MOVE and the slow reluctant motions of the climber. I thought back to the cave. I understood now why it had seemed familiar — I'd seen something similar in one of the simulations back on Earth. As a flighted predator, a complex, organized being, Marion could neither casually lay eggs like a bird nor carry the maturing weight of an embryo around inside her light-boned body. The compromise lay somewhere between the two; to create a mixture between womb and nest in some inaccessible spot. If I'd had the sense to recognize the cave for what it was and gone in alone, the human mechanisms that remained in her mind would probably have overridden her protective instincts more quickly. But clad in the climber — a great mechanical spider lumbering into her nest — what was I to expect?

I lay in my sleepsuit, shivering although I was no longer cold. Outside, rising slow and thunderous, drowning the wind, I heard the rumble of a distant avalanche. I remembered the dream I'd had of being in flight with Marion, her claws digging into me preparatory to some alien way of making love. The fact was, I'd avoided knowing too much about reproductive processes that were bound, from my human viewpoint, to appear strange — most certainly unerotic. I knew that the provision of the nest came soon after fertilization. Fine. But Marion, Robbie, Sarah were supposed to be alone here — a mature female and two immature offspring. Or so I'd thought. It was ridiculous, really, here in this absurd situation I'd made out of my own confusion and vanity, to feel jealous. But that, as the avalanches sounded again, closer now, changing the wind, shaking the very crystal beneath me, was how I felt. And I felt cheated, too. I felt betrayed. I felt angry.

That night the snow crust covering the col grew thin filaments. It was like walking over hoar-frosted grass next morning as I clambered across

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the drifts unaided to look at the horizon. I felt dreamless and rested. My leg was stiff but better, already healing. And there was so much light here, so much glory. Iridescent peaks, iridescent clouds. And no sign of three specks — or more — flying. My anger of the night before now seemed absurd, brought on by nothing but pain and worry. I just hoped that Marion hadn't been injured. And as to the peculiarities of making a new alien life, understanding would come to me soon enough.

As soon as I got back to the base, I'd bury those three empty bodies. I'd start the process of changing. My new shape was already waiting, a lump of Korain matter that needed only the will of the thought machines to precipitate it into life. That incident in the cave had been just what I had needed, a fortuitous accident — perhaps even something that Marion in her new alien wisdom had foreseen and planned. I ached to join her now. And Robbie. And Sarah.

I breathed the air. Salt and sap and snow and metal. From here, all I had to do was go down which, in climbing terms, surely had to be easier than up. It was like the process that had happened in my mind, giving way to the pull of this new world, a mere matter of accepting and adjusting. Hungry for breakfast, I skidded down the furred snow. The climber still sat where I had left it, coated like everything else in soft glitter. I called out to it with my mind. It just sat there. Puzzled, I stood beside it, brushing white from its limbs, noticing the congealed pool of oil that lay beneath its thorax and the deeper pelt of crystal that covered the rent from which the fluid had seeped. I flipped back a manual cover and gazed at the screens. But they too, were silvered with filaments. Stiff and cold and lifeless.

FOOD. OXYGEN TABLETS. Ropes and karabiners, a harness. Sleepsuit. Water. The struts and fabrics of the chambers. Manual iceaxes and bolts I'd never thought I'd have to use. Then food — enough to last for at least two days until I got within range of the thought machines. Heated boots and gloves. A first aid kit. It was bizarre, the weight we humans must carry just to stay alive. I packed it all into the extra pouch that the climber had carried, shortening the slings to fit across my shoulders.

I began to descend the ridge. My left leg was stiff but workable.

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Although the dead climber squatted uselessly in the col, I kept wondering what its help menu would have said about using a wind-driven ridge like this, so high that I could see nothing but garish cloud beneath, as a place to experiment in free climbing. Still, I kept going, resting and moving on, sticking to my rhythm and avoiding looking at anything but the step down. The task was do-able if you split it into small components; and the climber, after all, had scooted up this ascent without even thinking, grading it as EASY. Easy, I thought, jamming a hex into a wedge of rock and using the harness to back down. Nothing to it, not so very different to those rocky shores I used to clamber over with Sarah. She had a knack of catching limpets, creeping up and banging them off the rocks with a swiftly wielded pebble — a trick I could never manage. And she was a huntress in the rock pools, too, was our Sarah. So poised with her bare hands waiting in the clear water like pink shell-less crabs. Then she'd catch something; hold it bright to the sun and then plop into her bucket and then get the terminal to identify it back at the cottage. There was always one question Sarah would ask; could she cook it, eat it — no matter how tiny or gross — could she have it for her tea? Otherwise she lost interest. A little huntress, was — *is* — my — *our* — daughter. And Robbie was just the same, and looked up to his big sister, with her rods and her nets and her guns.

My left leg was becoming more awkward now, although there was still no pain. Sometimes I had to stoop and push it into position, and meanwhile had little enough purchase to hang on with. I thought about using the bolts to pin myself to the rock but I kept climbing free, knowing that the going was still EASY, knowing that I should save my equipment for what was to come.

I reached the end of the ridge. From the height of Deres riding over the peaks, it looked to be just past midday. Resting on a tilted rock, hunched against the wind, my breath pluming as I kneaded sore muscles, pulling all the extra heat and energy I could from my powerpack, I called up the time. But with the climber dead and far away from the thought machines, all I got was a cold space in my head. One thing I'd forgotten to bring was a manual timepiece.

After eating, and drinking what seemed like an absurdly large amount of fluid, I picked my way over the last of the ridge to look at the way ahead.

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The great verglas cliff face was gleaming half in shadow. It had taken the climber the larger part of an afternoon to get from the other side, and I had about five and a half, maybe six hours before darkness. I decided that it should be enough. The climber had been less than helpful during this part of our ascent anyway, and the alternative was just to wait here as the sweat began to chill and solidify in my outer garments, or to try some other route, possibly abseiling down into the jagged wasteland of crevasses below the verglas cliff. But the downward drop was too immense to be seriously contemplated, and even from here, picked out like some mad miniature fairyland, the crags and crevasses at the start of the glacier looked impassable.

Deres seemed to vanish in churning purple clouds as soon I made my way onto the cliff face. The wind chilled, became a solid physical presence, pulling at me with icicle arms and driving up a sleet of pinkish flakes from the drop beneath. I realized that the morning's descent had used up more of my energy than I'd imagined. *Tip-tap. Scrape-scrape.* Creaking ice. The bang of each fresh bolt, the hot tensing of my arms, the sway of the verglas crust in the moment before it crumbled. Then, starting with a slow itch and rising notch by notch, my left leg began to hurt. But at least when the ice was hacked off there was rock beneath. Easy technical climbing, I reminded myself. EASY.

Verglas. I was hanging in five degrees of overhang on a wall of thin ice. My eyes searched, and my mind gave only fifty percent solidity in every direction; was hedging its bets as the climber had done. Verglas. So clear, so slick and smooth to the touch. It was all I could see now. I looked around for Deres, no longer even tensing as fresh ice showered over me. The sky was dark. I tried to call up the time, but there was only the ice that held me and the pain in my trembling muscles and the thing that was working a hot dagger into my left leg. I looked down, truly expecting to see a grinning fronded maw. But there was nothing, just the endless spinning of the drop.

LEFT, RIGHT, UP, DOWN. I was back now within the climber, cursing its stupidity although I knew I had no reason to expect more now that it was dead. I gazed at the ice-coated cliff through the weight of the darkness, willing it to dissolve, disappear. My whole life had been shielded by these walls, something smooth and thin and barely tangible that

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somehow managed to separate me from everything, from a chance to LIVE. *That's what this is about,* I could hear Marion whispering to me above the scream of the wind. *Us humans with our weak lives, our soft and cozy planet, our weak senses. You need to break the verglas, Darling. You need to get THROUGH.*

I leaned back, breathless, aching, sodden with freezing sweat. Somewhere in these mountains, the alien sun had finally set. The harness dug beneath my shoulders and crotch. The belay bolt creaked. This was pointless. I knew I'd still be hanging here when my powerpack and my heart gave out — slowly frozen, or eaten as some new morsel by the grazing Korain life. I looked LEFT, the way I was supposed to be going. I could see only verglas slipping further and further from the vertical. There was no way that I could traverse such an overhang, no way that I could simply hang here all night. And UP was out of the question too. So was RIGHT. Which left only DOWN, seeing if I could fly. The idea was appealing. The darkness below looked friendly. Cushions of black. And I could stretch out my arms as I fell. I could swoop and glide. Marion and kids would join me, shrieking, laughing. *KI KIK KARR KARR* Lifting me up. It had to be the easiest way.

Feeling the trembling snap of weakened muscle, I reached for the remaining bolts strung in my harness. There was only one left. I unpeeled and dropped one of my gloves as I threaded the remaining length of rope through the loop of a descendeur. I twisted the descendeur, and the world slid by me as the rope hissed through. I dropped, slowed, then dropped again. The dark verglas cliff swung away, bounced back. I pushed off with my feet, yelping at a white flare of pain from my left leg. Down again, spinning. I thought of the fairyland of crevasses I'd seen below, the route I'd rather not have taken. How far up had I been from it? A thousand meters? But I'd gone DOWN as well as LEFT, and the beginnings of the glacier rose toward this end. The rope marker slipped through my hand. I slowed before I was jerked against the end-knot. There was no change in the rock surface. It was still verglas; flat, iced, vertical. I fired in my last bolt, and looped it through. I snapped out the catch and the rope fell past me out of the darkness. I twisted the descendeur and abseiled down for what had to be the last time, wet blisters rising and bursting on my ungloved hand. How far had I gone? I felt the marker slide by, the jolt of

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the end-knot. I hung there, swinging in empty darkness. That was it. I had no more bolts, and this time I wasn't even close to the verglas cliff. I could go no further. Before I had time to think, I reached for the knife in my belt with my one good hand, and cut the rope.

Then I was flying.

Some kind of lunar morning. Gray-whiteness all around. Craters and mountain peaks. I leaned up on my elbows, breaking a stiff covering of snow. A greenish wall of verglas loomed up into the mist.

I lay back again, surprised to be alive, wondering about all the pain and effort that implied. I drew on my powerpack. There was a brief flicker of warmth and energy. I called for my server. I searched for the thought machines. At least, I decided, lifting my good gloved hand up out of the snow, wondering at the odd absence of feeling in my other limbs, I still had the pouch. I somehow pulled it out of the snow. It was torn, empty. I lay back again, seeing the pretty amber flecks in the white, the way that, close to, they seemed to be moving. A few fell over me, glittering on my eyes. Feeling thirsty, I licked my lips. But the stuff was dry in my mouth. Salt, soil and metal.

Some time after, I discovered that I was up on my knees and crawling around, looking for something. Even if the pouch was empty, the stuff inside must have fallen nearby. My left leg felt as though some livid mechanism was slicing within it, and the snow here was oddly light. Moving forward, it crumpled and my arms pushed through. Looking into the hole I had made, I saw that I was hanging over the bluish depths of a crevasse. I tumbled back and curled up in the snow, nursing my pain and willing the cold to take it from me, gazing at the stiffened gray fingers of my bare hand.

Hours passed. No sunlight got to me but there was little pain until something suddenly stabbed at me. Not my legs or arms, but at the side of my back that still stuck a little out of the snow. I ignored it but it came again, more insistent, and I turned, a grumbling sleeper. I saw a black shape now amid the white, and scratched the crust of ice from my eyes. I was having nightmares. A creature with black wings, gray fur, long jaws, triple-jointed limbs, squatted over me. It tilted its head, but said nothing. After all, what could it possibly have to say? But then it opened its jaws

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and something dropped. I gazed at it, steaming close to my own eye-level on the snow. A crumped sac of blood-silvered flesh almost like that hurrying umbrella I'd seen though the quester and so clumsily destroyed. It gave off an odd smell, more cinnamon than metal. I looked up at the creature that had brought it. Marion. Her faceted eyes. The pulsing membrane in her throat. Those thinly coated wings. What was she expecting me to do? Congratulate her on her kill?

KAK KARR KIK KARR

I shrank back at the sound, loud and sharp in this place of silence — the same noise Marion had made as she squatted on the stone table back at the base, a signal to Sarah and Robbie that it was safe for them to feed. Her head shot out, snakelike from her lengthening neck. She pushed the carcass closer to me. I touched the flesh with my good hand. Watched by Marion — afraid, in all honesty, about what she might do if I didn't — I pushed the threads of salt coppery meat into my mouth, and chewed and swallowed.

She flew off in a quick burst of wings. I lay there, drowsier than ever, feeling whatever it was that she'd given me churn in my belly. Then she returned, hardly seeming to fly at all, just becoming there. Again, the dropped food. I marveled at her simplicity, that she could think she could feed me alien meat. I wondered if I was simply dreaming, playing the same incident over and over. *KAK KARR KIK KARR* Light bones, that snakelike neck, and already the day getting darker. Or perhaps it was my sight. The creature before me was smaller now anyway. Robbie or Sarah — I couldn't tell. The loose sac I was given burst moisture in my mouth. I drank it all, sucking greedily. Then I lay back. The problem was, the more I ate, the softer and wearier I became, the more comfortable grew the snow. I'd done everything right, really, to end up here. This place of understanding. Marion's voice now, as the pure wind began to rise, was a reassurance to me.

"It's not a question of *imagining*," she'd said that last day as we took the skimmer to Shell Island. Sweet sunlight and bright water. So clear. "That's the whole point — can't you see? — it's everything we can't imagine."

I nodded, holding a tiller worn smooth with my own and other hands.

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"You're too wrapped up in what you've seen in the simulations," she said. "It won't be like that. That's still all coming through these same minds we always use. We humans simply aren't equipped to be something else. Even as simple an action as looking, seeing, is routed in our heads down neural channels that are time-shared, jumbled up. The information's corrupted before it reaches our minds. Nothing is pure..."

This crystal sea. The gulls and the frigate birds wheeling. In a way, she was right. Even as you saw things, tasted the breeze with the four meager receptors on your tongue, it was slipping by, becoming memory. I searched around, thinking of a way to argue. But Marion, being Marion, was already ahead of me.

"I know all the things we humans have created. What we call civilization. This skimmer. And I know about Paris, Venice, Acapulco. But think of the best times we've had. Think of Ayres Rock, think of Bhutan, and of Borrowdale. We've always sought out the pure and the natural. We don't want civilization, we want this. This moment, uncorrupted. I mean look at them, there..."

She meant Sarah and Robbie, stooping over at the prow, untangling nets. Both brown and naked and weathered as the deck of this skimmer, Sarah's hair bleached whiter by the day, and Robbie's freckles blending into a mahogany stripe over his shoulders. When they came close to me now my children smelled of the sea, and of sunlight and fishscale and sand, of woodsmoke and flowers and blood and palm trees. Already, they were halfway there.

We were nearing Shell Island. I could see the white blaze of sand.

"There!" said Marion, pointing to the water. "That's what it will be like!"

I left the tiller to its own devices and went to the rail where a school of dolphins, their wet backs shining, were leaping beside us. So fast. Astonishingly high. Masters of everything, who'd left the land long ago and returned to the freedom of the sea...

Darkness was falling. There were heavy flakes lying over me, or a sense of high beating wings. The odd thing was, as I turned my head, that the snow was alight, alive, glowing. Each twisting amber fleck was the flame of a tiny candle. I hauled myself up on my arms. Truly this was some alien fairyland. Slowly, thinking MOVE, LIFT, I got to my knees, and saw

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that my left leg had threaded a dark pool of moisture. I peeled away a little of my legging, expecting pain. My leg was clearly visible in the weak but all-pervading glow. The artificial skin had sloughed off. The lips of the wound were open again, and inside there was white fur, almost like the pelt that had formed over the rent in the dead climber's abdomen. I could feel nothing. There was no pain. I tried to pluck the stuff away. Then, suddenly, there was pain. Pain that rocketed out through all my senses. I lay back in the golden snow, feeling sick tremors running through me. Even when they had gone, the snow had lost its comfort. It was one thing to die from the slow loss of hypothermia, another to consumed by some alien parasite. I felt stronger, anyway, than I had — sicker, too. I decided to start moving.

Some indeterminate time later, I was standing. All I had now was the pouch in which I'd carried my provisions — empty now, its contents dumped down the crevasse that had so nearly taken me. Still, I looped it around me and picked my vague and shambling way. At least, amid this candlelit snowfield, the deep mouths of the crevasses were easy to spot.

Morning and the darkening of the snows came simultaneously, one light fading as the other began. I could see the dawn-rainbowed peaks that confined the glacier, even a hint of lowland beyond. I stopped without thinking, falling down, exhausted, dragging myself into the shelter of an overhang. My powerpack was totally dead now and my boots and the remaining glove had ceased to give off any heat. I held up my exposed hand in the blush of morning light, using the other to wiggle each finger tentatively. They were senseless and gray, still wetly indented from the burns of the rope, but by rights they should have been worse; frozen flesh that snapped off like icicles.

I dozed through the morning, missing my sleepsuit, hoping in moments of consciousness that Marion and Sarah and Robbie would find me again. I had a desire for the slick coppery taste of alien meat that I doubted was entirely healthy. But it was better than nothing, a sign of my determination for life. Dimly awake, I had to smile at the thought of being taken over by the crystal fur that had grown out along my leg now, trailing filaments. I could see me stumbling along the glacier like some mushroom-mantled log, yelling, See Marion! I've done it! — I've changed without even trying!

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But there was no life here. No wingbeats. No glowing snow. Just me, the wind, cold aching silence. Despite the fluid I'd been given the day before I was agonizingly thirsty. My tongue was swelling and sticking in my mouth. I knew I had to get going.

I was out of the worst of the crevasses now and my left leg, despite the worrying outward signs, was actually becoming easier to use. Crashing over splinters of ice and diamonded moraine, I stumbled my way down the glacier. I kept moving as darkness finally came and a dancing opalescence filled the night sky. Looking up, falling over, getting up again, I was reminded of the Aurora Borealis. But that hung as a curtain on Earth's horizon, and this was sky-encompassing. Pondering, I stumbled on, and was pleased with myself a few hours later when I realized that this glow probably came not from Korai but from the dust belts that swirled between it and Deres, casting off the cosmic rain that otherwise would have prevented life from ever beginning here.

Morning again. Another day. I'd got beyond the glittering moraine at the edge of the glacier — dry, when I'd been hoping for meltwater — and was now approaching the ravined foothills. I kept looking up to the sky, wishing Marion down to bring some more of the odd-tasting flesh, the sour water. But her ways were not mine — nor was her understanding. Her new brain was geared for the pure moment, the pure sensation, everything pouring in over an unimaginable bandwidth that would have burned my feeble human synapses in a moment.

I came to the ravines that the climber had crossed. The ropes that it had fired were still there, those rustless bands that had seemed on the way up to be an act of desecration were now my salvation. I karabinered my harness and slung myself over the first of them, slowly hauling with my good hand. It was wearying, agonizing work, and there was no sign of an end to the drop beneath me. It probably sank deep into the planet, where all the meltwater went. And I felt sure that there was movement down there, some kind of flickering shoal.

The next ravine was wider. I had to stop many times, swaying and cursing myself as night began to fall. It was as bad as the verglas cliff face. I was sure I wouldn't make it. The flickering lights in the chasm below me seemed threatening, hallucinatory. Finally, I lay gasping on a rock on the far side, gazing up at the churning starless sky. I knew there had to be a way

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around these chasms, but stuck with my own useless mind, my own useless memory, I had no idea how far I would have to go. I suspected, anyway, swallowing dry air over the bolder of my swollen tongue, gazing at the glow that came through my ripped and fungi-encrusted leggings, that I had only a day or so left. I reached over and unclipped the karabiner. A fissure of the ravine, deep but little wider than the reach of my arm, had split the rock beside me. There was no doubt, peering into it, that lights were moving down there, flickering goldfish shoals. I lay looking down as the wind swept over me. The movements were closer now, and the shapes more apparent, truly like little fish. I smiled, remembering Sarah, those rock pools, how she'd wait for hours with her bare hands...

Deeper into the night, I felt two thoughts connect. I reached down with my good hand and saw the fish flicker close, near enough to throw their light onto my palm but always darting away as I grabbed toward them. Catching the little fish. It was a kind of dream-game, part nightmare. Then I remembered my empty pouch, and made the effort to unsling it, opening the mouth and lowering it amid the dancing shapes so that it dangled like a net, then jerking it up. Running my hand down the fabric, I felt movement inside, and squeezed. My hand grew slippery wet. I lifted the creature out, and nibbled at its flesh. Still glowing, not fishy at all, but coppery like all Korain life, with the threadlike bones that were impossibly hard and sharp. Managing to chew a little, forcing the stuff back over my gums, I swallowed, then stooped over the life-filled crevice again.

I managed to catch six of the little fish that night, and to squeeze out and drink a fluid that probably came from their bladders. It tasted sweet enough; what for them was waste matter was for me the stuff of life. The prospect next morning of bridging more of the ravines, although grim, no longer seemed hopeless. Stuffing the two fish that I'd saved into my pouch, noting that they were translucent in daylight, their inner organs like the mechanism of an old analog clock, I set out across the crystal landscape.

It was an hour or so later that my left leg, which I had done my best to ignore since it had stopped hurting, suddenly emitted a red shriek of pain. I rolled over on the rocks, gasping, and gazed down at my leg in agonized disbelief. The white fungi was moving, rippling. Then the mossy stuff parted, and a silvery eel about six centimeters long wriggled out from my flesh and sniffed the air. Too amazed to move, I watched it slide

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quickly across the rock beside me and bury itself out of sight. Then the fungus on my leg withered and shrank like melting snow. Within a few minutes all that was left was a sticky gray residue, and a clean-looking scar. Still only half-believing, I touched it. It was so normal. So real. I moved my leg, testing. Then my shoulders began to shake. I tilted my head up toward the rainbowed skies, and began to laugh.

I was sure that evening — crossing the last of the roped-over ravines, and even though any sense of the thought machines still evaded me — that I was within a day's reach of the base. As I sagged dangling on a rope or slithered over yet another fall of fractured crystal, I buoyed myself up with the knowledge of how far I had already come. I was immensely weary, but it would have seemed sinful to give up now. That night I fished for food in another narrow chasm — managing to catch five of the air fish, shyer and blue-banded here — then took shelter in a roofed-over rockfall.

The wind was quieter now, a thin shriek. And I no longer hoped that every sound might be Marion or Sarah or Robbie. I didn't even quite think of them by those names any longer. They had changed. And so, in a sense, had I. I was still hungry, thirsty, weary, but at least I no longer had to contend with the end of my existence. This planet, so strange, so hazardous, was also kind in a way that the mountain territories of Earth never were. Korai was truly a hopeful place, somewhere of fresh beginnings. I no longer felt scared here, or lonely. And when I got back to the base, when I got back... I winced in the darkness and shifted off a blade of rock, too tired to think by now, or sleep, or dream.

The last of the journey back to base was infinitely tedious. I kept looking back at the mountains, willing them to make the precise shape that I recognized from my days alone in the canyon. In near darkness, I reached the jeweled riverbed, and stumbled my way along it, heedless of the risk of falling. Every part of me ached and the thought machines, whose transmissions should have been vivid by now, remained vague. Finally, finally, I stumbled around a boulder and found that I was standing on top of the scree slope above a dead lake. Dim but definite, the whole territory of my confinement stood before me once again. I slid down to the tundra. Staggering toward the chambers, weaker than ever, I called for the lights, called for the server. Nothing happened. The chambers stayed dark.

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The thought machines murmured aimlessly. I ripped open my chamber, collapsed, and gazed up for a moment at the whipping field-less fabric before dropping into enormous caverns of sleep.

It was light when I awoke, then dark, then light again. I staggered out once to relieve myself and vomit up bile and silver-blue scales. I couldn't remember where the server kept the drinks. Instead I dragged myself over to the lake. It tasted gritty, rank, familiar. I awoke again on what was probably the evening of my third day. I was sensible enough by now to understand that this odd failure of response had to do with my damaged powerpack. I hobbled along to the control chamber and manually turned up the lights, the heat. I also got the server working, and the processor. Fumbling with keys I was unused to handling, weak and suddenly ravenously hungry, I opted for the first item on the processor's menu. It was only after I'd eaten the gray slab-like lumps that I realized what it was that I'd ordered.

By the next day I was in better control. My left leg seemed fine, and although my frost-bitten hand was still swollen I found that I could move the fingers tolerably well as long as I kept taking pain killers. The Korain sun was bright and warm. There was hardly any wind, or any need to set up the fields. I sat for timeless hours watching the pseudocrabs scuttling in their purposeful way, or gazing up at the warm turquoise-streaked sky, remembering Robbie, and how he'd fallen and banged his head on that very first day. It was a chore to keep track of the thought machines without proper reception from my powerpack, but I grew used to keying in manual commands to the server — and many of the other distractions I'd once relied on seemed irrelevant. And my dreams were entirely my own now, even when I slept within a sleepsuit — and they were so vivid, and all about Earth.

I continued to live a kind of semi-detached existence from the normal goings-on at the base, watching the server scuttling on unexplained errands in much the same way that I watched the pseudocrabs. I had no warning when the first of the questers returned from its long journey. I even thought for a moment when the silver figure scuttled out of the twilight that the climber — or its ghost — had somehow returned.

Such were my days. A process of physical and mental healing. I no longer put out food for the creatures that Marion and Robbie and Sarah had

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become. I no longer scanned the skies in the hope that I might see them. And sometimes, although it seemed bizarre in view of all that had happened, I found myself clambering over the canyon with my feet and hands, traversing some gleaming stretch of cliff that seemed especially intriguing. I climbed unaided, just relishing the true solid feel of the rock, the absence of any barrier between me and anything, the taste and the smell of this planet, the loss of verglas, the true sense of being here.

One day, perhaps three weeks after I'd returned, I was resting after a quick ascent of a greenish fissured face above the white scree slope, looking down at the canyon and the base and catching my breath in sunlight, thinking that tonight I would finally get around to drinking that last bottle of champagne, when I noticed a slight change in coloration of the tundra close to the base. Three long rectangles in the turf that I puzzled over for some minutes before realizing.

I drank the champagne back inside the chambers that evening. It gave me the courage I needed to go and see the bodies of Marion, Robbie, Sarah. After all that had happened, it seemed wrong that they should still be here to remind me — even in my thoughts I'd been avoiding them. But I stood looking at those three beautiful bodies that once held the people I had loved. Now gone, leaving just slumbering golden-threaded flesh...

I tossed and turned that night, experiencing insomnia for the first time in my life. Everything seemed gray, black. What, after all, was I doing here? What had I gained? I willed my Earth dreams to come, but there was nothing. My sleepsuit felt rough and unaccommodating. Somewhere in the higher reaches of this planet were alien beings I was too afraid to join, creatures that I could never understand or know. *Here. This is everything...* Marion's claws in me and the drop. *KI KIK KARR KARR* And that cave. New life. Not even three circling figures, but more. More...

I could still taste the champagne — sweet and sharp, just the way it had been that last evening I'd spent here with my human family. I remembered how the kids had been so excited about the coming change that Marion had had to up-program their sleepsuits to get them quiet for the night. Then she and I had sat outside the chambers around a real fire of applewood logs we'd brought with us for the occasion. I remembered the way she smiled and held her glass, the way the smoke was snatched as it drifted out of the fields. We didn't say much. There was nothing much left to say. A time of stillness here on this far planet that felt so much stranger

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to me then as the wind howled and the dark white mountains loomed. The silence of change, of resolution. I remembered Marion taking my hand and leading me to the chambers, stepping from her clothes, tossing away the sleepsuits. We slept naked and together that night, flesh on flesh. At some point, an act less of passion than of sharing, a remembrance of other times, we rocked slowly together, making love.

I sat up in the trembling dark and fumbled for the manual switch I'd rigged to turn on the lights. I stumbled down the chambers to the thought machines, and sat there for the rest of the night wrestling with the manual screens beside emanators I could no longer use, attempting to find my way into one program amid the myriad. It took me until the light of Deres had begun to show through the wind-fluttering fabric. And when I found it, that hidden blob that only senses stronger and stranger than my own could reveal, I had to keep checking, scanning and re-scanning the cloudy images. Even then, I still couldn't quite believe.

THE THOUGHT MACHINES were grumpy and distant now. Perhaps it was just the difficulty they now had in dealing with me, this powerpackless human — but I suspected that they would never have diagnosed Marion without my prompting, or have told me if they knew. It still seems likely to me that they would have simply allowed me to bury Marion. To their way of thinking, I suppose, she had carried the new life with her when she changed, to be re-born in that cave.

Summer faded and returned. I lived and breathed and walked and climbed. The sac of life nurtured within Marion's body continued to grow. I sat for hours beside the stillfield as the sky flickered green and red and blue outside, sometimes touching the swelling in the fold of her sleepsuit, sometimes lost in sorrow, or happy, or drifting with my mind almost clear of thought. Sometimes, too, I felt anguish at this thing that I was doing. What right had I, alone on this planet, to bring life? But the anguish faded with the touch of warm flesh and the scent and the nearness of the three loved bodies that surrounded me. I knew I couldn't destroy Marion now, knowing of the life that she was nurturing.

She grew big with the heat of summer, as the air turned truly warm and fresh water gurgled, too slick and fast for all the ravines between me and the mountains to swallow, into my swelling lake. There were new

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forms of life in there too. Colored fronds and filaments. A slow gray mud-like wing that flapped and crawled along the bottom. The pseudocrabs brought out their young. Shell-less and pink like tiny crawling hands, they dutifully studied their parents as they scuttled from rock to rock across the soggy tundra, clumsily stuffing berries into their own nascent pouches before getting lost, or falling over. A monitor satellite in deep solar orbit made contact with a starship that passed near Deres, and checked me out with a quick exchange of beams. I told them that I was well, making excuses for the clumsiness of my transmission, and worried for days after that they might still change route and visit me. But they didn't. And I was fine anyway. I felt safe being alone.

One evening as I was sitting outside of my chambers, studying the rock and the warm ribboned glint of the skies, I heard, almost as I had expected to now that I'd given up hoping, the gray beat of wings. They came from a different angle this time, from another part of the sky. Who knew, after all, just how far across this planet Marion and Robbie and Sarah had been roaming? And now there were four shapes, not three; one large, another two only slightly smaller, then a smallest, a tiny fleck riding the slipstream of its mother. Marion settled first, cupping her new offspring inside the protective arch of her wings. She looked around as I ran over to her. I caught the faceted glint of her eyes.

"I'm fine!" I shouted. "Marion, It's great to see you!" But my voice sounded strange even to me after these months of silence and she backed away at the sound of it, her wings catching the air, ready for flight. Ugly as a gargoyle, the little creature beside her hissed and whimpered. Robbie and Sarah still circled. I looked again at Marion, willing her to call them down. But our children were nearly adult now, and would probably take little notice of her.

Moving slowly, I backed away from the rock table, then broke into a run, splashing through the puddled tundra. I stabbed breathlessly at the keys in a flapping chamber, grabbing the hot slabs as they emerged from the processor and running back out with them into the deepening twilight. But the shapes had already vanished from the rock table. There were no wingbeats in the air. I scanned the sky as darkness deepened until my eyes were nothing but thickened pools of black. But there was no sign of them. It was as if they had never been.

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The first snows of winter came. I had seen the snow in patches here when we first arrived, and then of course up in the mountains, but none of it had ever been this green. The seasons here, I was coming to realize, were like the flash of light through a dozen different patterns of weave. Marion's belly grew taut. I saw the baby stirring on the scans, and felt it kicking with my own hands. Afraid to think of him growing alone and in silence, I began to talk and pace around the stillfield. And at night, as the wind howled and glowing plumes of ice curled over the canyon like beckoning hands, I even began to sing.

I ordered pain killers for Marion on the night she gave birth. The thought machines couldn't understand why I didn't let them use the server's blades simply to cut the baby out — nor why her emptied synapses could be disturbed by the lost concept of pain. Anyway, the contractions came easily, thoughtlessly induced by the still-functioning ganglions in Marion's spine. I could even say the birth itself was easy, but then how can I ever know? — and for me, watching as Marion's eyes opened and her belly tensed and her jaw spasmed, as her whole body sweated and strained and came briefly to life, it was truly hard. I was in tears afterward as I washed the baby and cleaned and cut his cord, smiling and sobbing as I laid him in the crook of Marion's arms as she lay wrecked and drained amid the spreading pool of afterbirth and he sucked the clear whitish fluid from her breasts.

I sat for many hours beside the stillfield, rocking my sleeping baby. He looked different as all babies look different. The red forehead, the huge thin-lidded eyes, those impossible toes and fingernails. It was so strange, that he should come here to me now. All so hard to believe — but then that's what it's like to be human, the way things slip away. It's what keeps us together and apart.

I let him suckle Marion for a few days, holding him against her in the crook of her warm lifeless arms. But the golden veins of the stillfield threaded her breasts, and even with her body cleansed and refreshed, something had gone from her with the birth. The last vestige, I supposed, of the life that had held me back from burying her all those months before. And Robbie and Sarah, although I held the baby to them as well and whispered every secret I could imagine into their ears, seemed also to have lessened, changed. They were far brighter in my dreams and

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memories these days than they were in the flesh. I supposed they'd grown a little, become more of what they would never become. As with the true living sprits that soared the mountains with Marion, it was time for them to leave.

I worried as my baby cried that he wouldn't take to the milk the processor provided. I worried about his mind, the way he had grown within the stillfield, and how the air of this strange new planet would affect him. I would sometimes take him out from the chambers when the wind died down, well-wrapped and held close against me. Then, in the blazing chill of these mountains, I knew that everything was safe. The way his face lit up at the sight of the glittering multi-hued ice, those gorgeous flooding skies. And even at two months old he was reaching out with his hands toward it all. And the dream light that I remembered so well from Marion was there in his eyes.

Winter receded a little — although I knew enough about Korai by now not to think it would be followed by anything as mundane as spring. As the snows pooled and melted, blue moth-like creatures emerged from it and took flight. I was grateful for the new warmth — my food supplies had been stretched far longer than planned. Planning to replenish them, I set out one morning with my baby harnessed to my back, hiking up the scree slope and along the meltwater-threaded drifts to the first of the ravines. There were great shoals down there now, huge and plentiful. My baby watched and slept and smiled as I stooped into the roaring caverns. But when I hooked out the creatures twisting and flopping into my hands, when I had let my baby touch them with his plump-knuckled fingers, I simply let them slide back into the ravine. Now that my own life no longer depended on it, I couldn't bring myself to kill something that was *living*.

That was a year ago; I scrimped and survived. Another human family have now come to Korai. They contacted me via satellite when they arrived, and flew over the range a few days later in the big craft they'd brought with them. I watched it land, the howling engines flattening the tundra beside the table of rock. I held my baby close as he chuckled at this strange new silver creature and at the smaller ones that emerged from it. But he frowned as they grew closer. Two boys, a man and a woman. I think

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he thought we were the only humans on this or any other world.

They treated us with courtesy. Their server unloaded fresh generators and chambers and supplies. As mine helped, I noticed how it had corroded to green in the near-on two Earth years I'd been here, and how the old chambers it was replacing had grown mottled and dark with Korain fungi. Before, I hadn't even noticed.

"What's his name?" the woman asked as we sat out in the cool lavender twilight. I'd let her hold my baby, which was a strange sensation in itself. He and I had become like parts of each other; it was like lending someone your arm. But my baby was uncomplaining after an initial squawk of surprise. He gazed up at her with fierce blue questioning eyes; he was that kind of kid.

She repeated her question. I blinked back at her. I hadn't thought of a name. With just the two of us here, there had never been any need.

Letting it pass, she smiled and looked around at where her boys and her husband were wandering, calling to each other with strange loud voices as they peered under rocks and climbed up slopes and made fresh discoveries. Even without asking, she'd know my whole story anyway. She had her powerpack, access to my thought machines.

"But this is such a beautiful planet," she said. "As soon as we landed, everything else faded, all my worries and regrets. Even..." She looked down. In her arms, my baby chuckled. "Him... This..."

"I understand," I said, "why people want to change. I've changed myself. That's the oddest thing of all. I've changed too. I just didn't have to lose my humanity to do so."

"We'll all go together. I mean the kids. Me and Mark. It'll be soon."

"That's probably the best way."

She held out her arms. I took my baby back from her. He said *Ka-Koo* and I breathed the salt-soapy scent of the crown of his hair. Then she stood up, looking around. Those bright red peaks behind which Deres had set long ago even though the whole sky was still glowing. "Those..." She pointed toward the mountains. "That highest one there. What do you call it? Seeing it all this time, you must have..."

I shook my head and followed her as she walked across the tundra. Her youngest son ran up to her with something in his hands. A pseudocrab that he'd tried to dismantle like a clockwork toy was dribbling marbled Korain

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blood through his fingers. Pseudocrab. A name of sorts. Dayflower. As for the rest, as for all the life and the crags and ravines of this planet, as for that highest red-stained peak that I'd so nearly died on and the creatures that Marion and Robbie and Sarah had become, I hadn't presumed to give any of it a name. Things here are what they were, and ultimately alien. No names could ever change that.

"Samuel," I said.

"What?"

"My baby. I call him Samuel."

"That's good. I once knew someone..."

We wandered a little further. The wind was picking up. The sky was showing threads of golden dark. The father was calling to his eldest son to get down from the ridge above the lake that he was trying to ascend. The servers had finished their work. Soon, the family would be going.

The ground was a little softer here. Even folded over in this gathering gloom, the dayflowers beneath our feet seemed larger, brighter. She glanced down at the three darker rectangles they picked out in the sod, then back at me.

"You know the starship that brought us here will be out in stellar orbit for another month?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"I was wondering..."

"If I might be going? I'm not sure. I love this planet so much. But seeing you, realizing about my — Samuel. I know can't bring him up alone here. He has his own life."

"He has to learn how to deal with things," she said. "He'll need a powerpack — assessment and teaching, skills to understand the thought machines. How to work a sleepsuit..."

"Not that I miss any of that."

"But you've got to let him make his own decisions. That's what we're all doing here." She folded her arms and looked about her. "But you'll be going? You'll take that starship back to Earth?"

"Yes," I nodded, feeling the soft Korain air flooding around me, the moments of my life slipping by. "I'll be going."

"Look." She smiled and touched my arm. She was pointing. "Up

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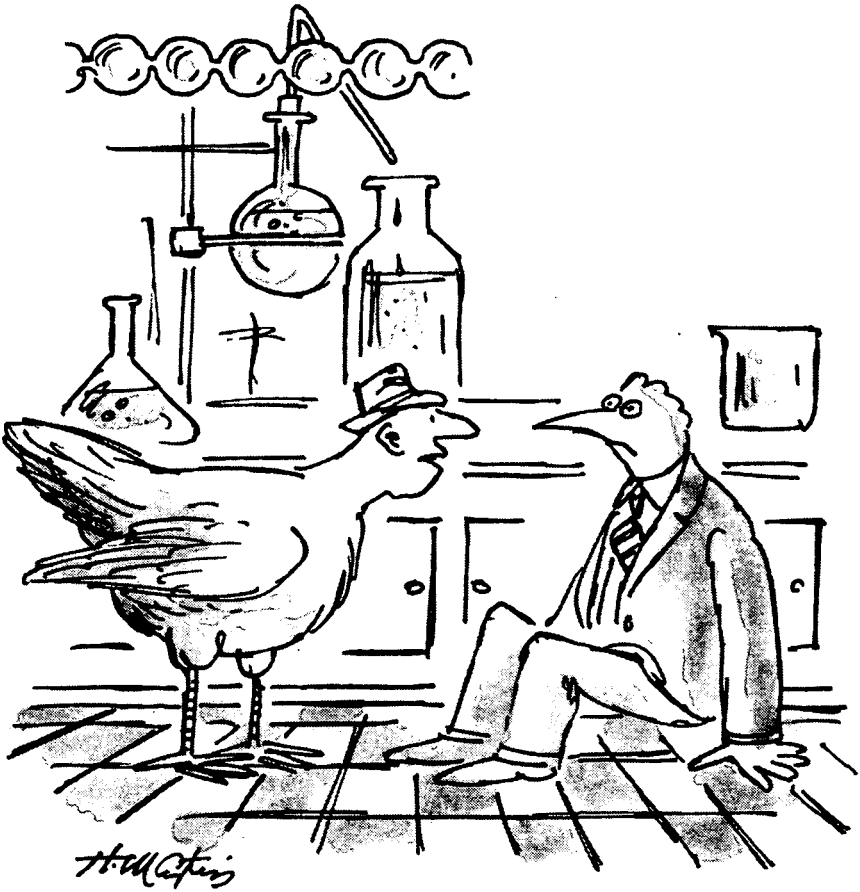
there." Her voice was shivering, expectant. Against the cliff, glimpsed and distant, four black specks were rising.

I held Samuel up to see. He chuckled — *Ka-Koo* — and pointed with his outstretched chubby hand.



"I agreed to this experiment
because I yearned to fly, but you...I don't get it."

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The 37th Mandala, by Marc Laidlaw, St. Martin's Press, 352pp, $23.95, Hardcover

Ancient Echoes, by Robert Holdstock, Roc, 368pp, $12.95

A LITTLE MORE than a year ago I took to watching *The X-Files*. At first it was part of my job (I was working for *TV Guide* Online at the time), but quickly I found myself really liking it, and I still watch it today. But its appeal makes me wonder (as I often have before) just how such fare — the occult, UFOs, Bigfoot — relates to sf. Non-sf readers tend to assume that it's all the same — an alien is an alien, after all — while most sf fans know there's something essentially different going on. I've always been fascinated by matters paranormal, from ghosts and mummy's curses to ancient astronauts, telekinesis, and spirit photography, but I've never entertained any real belief in these things, and most sf readers and writers I've known have taken a similarly skeptical view. In fact, I've often thought that *belief* was the crucial distinction between the two fields: sf readers know that, no matter how much they want some of the worlds they read about to exist, they don't, while the occult audience believes (at least in principle) in the reality of the phenomena they're interested in.

When I picked up Marc Laidlaw's most recent book, *The 37th Mandala*, I didn't expect it to bear on this issue at all, but if I'd thought about it I might have seen it coming: Laidlaw brings a Lovecraftian flavor to his contemporary horror story, and certainly Lovecraft's brand of cosmic terror has spawned its share of believers who search in musty libraries for the works of the mad Arab Abdul al-Hazred. But Laidlaw makes the issue much more explicit than Lovecraft ever did. His central character, Derek Crowe, is a cynical

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hack New Age writer who believes in none of the claptrap he panders, drawing inspiration from other sources and repackaging it with a feel-good treatment à la *The Celestine Prophecy*. But this time he's found a dangerous source, an elderly mystic whose tales of malevolent wheel-shaped astral beings ("mandalas") are plain truth. Knowing the bleak vision won't sell as-is, Crowe has rewritten the old man's manuscript entirely, changing his apocalyptic rhetoric into a reassuring blend of self-help philosophy and generic white-light spiritualism. Crowe has kept all the rituals and spells unchanged, though; since they're in what he thinks is gibberish, he sees no point in rewriting them. Those rituals, in the hands of his unsuspecting readers, will unlock the gateway between our world and that of the mandalas, and they'll be free to invade the material plane and enslave the planet.

It's not hard to see the echoes of Lovecraft here, and Laidlaw uses plenty of Lovecraftian vocabulary and imagery as well. A peek into the realm of the mandalas shows us "stairs leading down into violet caverns, knife-edged mushrooms, oily winged things rising up from motionless black lakes." But at every turn Laidlaw updates the Lovecraftian tone, juxtaposing typically Lovecraftian passages with images that are almost bathetic in their mingling of everyday items and cosmic horror: a mandala descends "like a vast black sentient ceiling fan," while in its target's mind "something deeply rooted in all the errors and apprehensions of matter, sent a momentary spasm through her muscles, a surge of animal panic." Now and then there are hints of the nihilist philosophy at the heart of Lovecraft's horrific vision: Crowe's skeptical side thinks of the universe as "nothing but particles and waves, infinite cold prickled by radiation, space-time warped and puckered by forces he would never understand, but which he took on faith to be completely devoid of moral character." But Laidlaw also presents a kind of flesh-hating antimaterialism more typical of contemporary horror stories: the punky ex-addict Lenore, possessed by the mandalas, is "sickened to think of her own bones trapped and smothered in flesh, except for teeth standing like outcrops of rock, small peaks protruding from a thick red sea." Altogether it generates a deliciously schizophrenic atmosphere, shifting from the vast scope of the Lovecraftian mode to the gory gro-

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tesquerie of contemporary horror so smoothly that we almost stop noticing.

In some ways, though, Laidlaw turns the Lovecraftian worldview on its head. Crowe's vision of an uncaring cosmos echoes Lovecraft, but for him it's a source of reassurance rather than terror. He retreats into existentialism as a way of avoiding his feelings of guilt — it's far more terrifying to contemplate a universe that might make a judgment and exact revenge. And Crowe's guilty secret itself contains a fairly damning indictment of the pitfalls of uncritical belief: a child dies because her Christian Scientist parents trust in prayer rather than medicine. In Laidlaw's contemporary context, the polarities of Lovecraftian horror are reversed: skepticism offers solace while belief invites disaster.

Laidlaw portrays Crowe's readers and admirers — and most believers in general — as a bunch of rather pathetic dupes, yet we can't miss the fact that, at least in the case of the mandalas, the believers are absolutely right. And it's actually Crowe's *disbelief* that gives the mandalas the opportunity to cross over into our world. Crowe's elderly source implores him to burn the manuscript, but even a fairly convincing demonstration of the old man's paranormal powers doesn't shake Crowe's defensive skepticism, and so he proceeds with his reworking of the text.

These contradictory messages work in certain ways against the expectations of a genre horror novel: despite the rhetoric that surrounds them, the mandalas never settle firmly into their role as agents of pure evil, at least partly because of the wild swings of the narrative's moral compass. It's exceptionally hard to break the story down into a good-and-evil structure. At one point Lenore critiques her boyfriend's interest in the occult: "He had everything so easy, seeing life in religious terms, in black and white.... He had no idea how mixed up the world could get, how everything bled over into everything else, forming one enormous gray zone," and this observation may be the central tenet of the novel. Laidlaw can't help seeing how "mixed up" the world can get, either, and he carries this ambiguity through to the very end of the book.

True as such a vision is to the realities that we all face, it isn't always the best prescription for a horror plot. *The 37th Mandala* starts out very strong, with a first line that practically insists that you read

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on, but somewhere in the last hundred pages it starts to lose some of its drive and clarity. Just when we think we've got some of the logic of the mandalas worked out, things happen that don't quite fit, and the logic starts to break down. It's not often that I find myself wishing for a few more nods in the direction of genre expectations, but here I think they might have helped prop the storyline up through to the end. Nevertheless, *The 37th Mandala* leaves a powerful impression, both in its mingling of cosmic Lovecraftian horror and vivid splatterpunk carnality and in its dialogue on belief and skepticism. It's a horror novel that leaves you with a lot to think about.

Robert Holdstock's latest novel, *Ancient Echoes*, has a fine opening as well, and it addresses some of the same issues as *The 37th Mandala*, but it takes a bit longer to come together. First we meet John Garth, an archaeologist who has "spent his life dowsing for cities," relying on a kind of second sight in his decisions about where to dig. But the book's central character is Jack Chatwin, whom we encounter first as a boy afflicted with powerful visions that offer glimpses of another world or another time, where two primitive people — he calls them Grayface and Greenface, the features he recalls best — are pursued by something fearsome, maybe a huge red bull, of which Jack gets only the faintest impressions.

Jack's visions are a troublesome curiosity when he's young, a research project for a psychologist and a fascinating enigma for his schoolmate Angela, but once he's grown the visions cease for a dozen years. During that time he marries Angela and they have a child, Natalie, so when the visions of Grayface and Greenface return, more potent than ever, they threaten to tear his relatively stable domestic world apart. During one particularly powerful episode, Grayface actually materializes, leaping forth from Jack like Athena from Zeus, and he's furious that Greenface has refused to follow. Since Jack's clearly the link between the two worlds, Grayface presses him to find Greenface and bring her through, and he takes Natalie hostage to be sure Jack agrees.

Early on *Ancient Echoes* displays some interesting parallels to Laidlaw's book. Holdstock's juxtaposition of mythic elements and everyday scenery ("a place of sanctuaries and sacred groves which had

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suddenly become visible to him among the office blocks and churches of the modern age") feels rather like the union of cosmic fear and quotidian detail that gives Laidlaw's novel its unusual atmosphere. And Jack's contact with the otherworld has a possessive and perilous aspect that recalls the influence of the mandalas: Jack "had been five years old when the bull-runners first smashed through the walls of space-time and pillaged his inner eye," and later on (before he comes fully across to our world) Grayface takes over Jack's body in an attempt to rape Angela.

Even the trouble *Ancient Echoes* has getting going feels much like the rough edges that arose toward the end of *The 37th Mandala*. There's a curious lack of disbelief or shocked surprise among the people who witness and study Jack's visionary fits, though some of the phenomena — audible sounds, pungent odors, etc. — would seem pretty clearly paranormal. The ruins of the city of Glanum that Garth excavates under Jack's hometown don't seem to fit into any recognizable period of history — they show signs of Roman, Greek, Persian, Celtic, Byzantine, and countless older cultures — but there's no sense that the mystery has excited the kind of international furor that such a discovery would certainly produce. The early chapters take place in a kind of vacuum, and the sense of discontinuity grows so strong that for a while I was wondering if it were all meant to suggest that this was *not* our world, but some kind of parallel reality where such things aren't so surprising as they would be here.

But eventually the awkwardnesses of the beginning start to smooth out, as if Holdstock were simply impatient to get the groundwork into place so he can get on with the interesting story he wants to tell. When Jack heads into the otherworld to retrieve Greenface, Holdstock finally begins to hit his stride. Often I get bored with lengthy descriptive flights into fantasy land, but Holdstock's got a gift for producing vivid images rich in archetypal resonance that give his imagined landscapes a moodier, more compelling feel than most: giant statues that have turned skeletal as they've aged, a snow-covered harbor crowded with scuttled hulls trapped in the ice, the approach to an ancient city: "Above the low gate was the skull of a bull; the road to the gate was lined with the curved horns of a hundred bulls, each point fluttering with colored fabric."

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Developed with subtlety and distinctiveness, the imagined world of the "bull-runners" becomes the most interesting and involving part of the book.

Though the cover and back copy suggest that *Ancient Echoes* is pure fantasy, Holdstock gives his scenario of time-traveling cities and survivals of antiquity a clearly science-fictional spin: Jack ventures into the otherworld through a peculiar experimental device, a kind of brain scanner and virtual reality projector put together to allow a subject to delve quite realistically into the deep unconscious landscapes of his or her own mind. Holdstock handles the odd mixture of hard science and speculative, almost fantastical psychology with an expert hand, adding a dash of humor here and there to break the conceptual tension without ever tipping the balance into absurdity; it's enough to disarm doubts without inviting ridicule.

And in this way as well *Ancient Echoes* recalls *The 37th Mandala*. Crowe's old mystic takes a very unusual attitude toward science, advising his students to look for "rational explanations first"; science, he says, "is an important power in this world, and for good reason: It *works*." Both Holdstock and Laidlaw (rather like the writers of *The X-Files*) give their ventures into the paranormal a grounding in a scientific/rational worldview; it makes the occult elements much more acceptable to the sf palate.

Ancient Echoes also shares the studied moral ambiguity that makes *The 37th Mandala* so thought-provoking. We're never sure just how to view Jack's visions, or the two people in them; on the one hand they're on the run, and attract our sympathies, but Grayface's behavior once he's in Jack's world suggests a darker character, ruthless and even somewhat cruel. The climactic scenes tie up most of the logical questions we've got left, but they avoid any simplistic moral geometry. As in *The 37th Mandala*, only one thing is clear: the perils of "blind faith," whether it be in the constant care of godly angels or the absolute knowledge of science. Some sort of balance — some tolerance for ambiguity — seems essential in both books, whether you're a character in them or a reader hoping to enjoy them.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Résumé with Monsters, by William Browning Spencer, Borealis, 1996, 469pp, $5.99, Paperback

A FEW installments ago I wrote about Spencer's latest novel, *Zod Wallop*, which had been my first introduction to his work and I wanted to read more. So, since the Permanent Press hardcover editions of his earlier books aren't exactly spilling off the bookshelves at my local bookstore, I was happy to see a more readily available mass market reprint of *Résumé with Monsters* come from Borealis, the fiction arm of White Wolf Publishing.

Here we're introduced to Philip Kenan, a failed novelist who makes his living at dismal jobs like the night shift of Ralph's One-Day Résumés, who has followed his girlfriend Amelia to Austin, Texas, from Washington, DC. Kenan is an odd and not entirely likable character. His fixation on Amelia borders on stalking and he can't seem to make much of his life, either as writer or trying to fit into "the System," which is what his father called the business world and what Kenan comes to believe is actually run by the unpleasant pantheon of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos.

Of course everyone thinks he's crazy and, frankly, much of the time the reader can't be so sure either, but that's what makes the book such a compelling read. It's partly a black humor critique of the contemporary work place, partly a novel of cosmic horror, partly a fascinating character study wherein we see either the validation of Kenan's fears, or his descent into a complete mental breakdown.

Résumé with Monsters isn't as immediately endearing as *Zod Wallop*, but it has many of that book's highpoints: a wonderful cast of quirky characters, an authorial style that's both literate and engaging, and an ability to leave readers

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questioning their assumptions of reality. And it's certainly the freshest take on those hoary old unspeakable monsters of Lovecraft's that I've seen in some time.

The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Ninth Annual Collection, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, St. Martin's Griffin, 1996, 624pp, $17.95, Trade paperback

As I've mentioned before, I try to avoid discussing books from which it might seem that I could benefit (in this case, I have a story in the collection under discussion), but frankly the reprint fees are so small that anyone thinking extra sales of this book would help me personally are working under a misapprehension. And as a lover of short fiction speaking to other lovers of the same, it would be a disservice to ignore the book since it, along with Gardner Dozois's annual companion volume *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, are two of the best ongoing sources for quality short fiction to appear in our field, period.

With so many professional magazines and anthologies published in the genre, not to mention all the small press magazines and more obscure mainstream press sources, it's impossible for even a dedicated reader to keep up with it all. Happily, the editors have done some of that hard work for us and while I'll quibble over the "year's best" in the title, because such designations make as much sense as comparing the proverbial apples to oranges, that doesn't stop the latest edition of Datlow and Windling's series from containing a cornucopia of superb stories.

I especially appreciate their choices from the more obscure choices. Because I try to follow what gets published in the field, I'd already read and enjoyed the stories from writers such as Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Midori Snyder, Stephen King, Peter Crowther, Lucy Taylor, Patricia A. McKillip and the like. But without the editors tracking down contributions from *The Southern Review, Esquire, The New Yorker* and other magazines I don't read on a regular basis, I would have missed some wonderful reading experiences. And so might you.

And if that and the handsome Thomas Canty cover aren't enough of a reason to pick the book up, then there are the overview essays of the past year by each of the editors, as well as by Edward Bryant (covering media), and the extensive list of honorable mentions at the back of the book that provide an intriguing

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starting point for us to do further reading on our own.

Gibbon's Decline and Fall, by Sheri S. Tepper, Bantam Books, 1996, 416pp, $22.95, Hardcover

Like Andrew Vachss, Sheri Tepper has made a career of working mostly within a particular theme, "message" books if you will, but also like Vachss, she's never been satisfied to simply repeat the same viewpoint in book after book. Rather, each time out, she explores the issue from another vantage point. Vachss writes about child abuse; Tepper explores the second-class citizenship of women which is still far too prevalent throughout the world. What neither writer forgets, however, is to give the reader a gripping story on which to hang the serious concerns that lie at the root of their books.

The center of *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* has two threads: a criminal trial defended by Carlyn Crespin, a retired lawyer brought out of retirement to defend a fourteen-year-old girl accused of murdering her own child by leaving it in a dumpster; and the long-term friendship between Crespin and six other women that began when they were students in university and continues to the present day. Needless to say, the two threads soon weave together, and so effectively that neither could stand on its own, which is how it should be.

The scope of the book is far too vast to do justice describing in the space we have here. It's not simply the large cast of characters — for Tepper provides viewpoint perspectives from all seven of the women as well as from many of the other characters. Nor is it the theme, though lord knows the horrors inflicted upon women by right-wing society, the fervently religious and generally mean-spirited could fill far too many volumes on their own.

In *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* Tepper addresses both in great detail, but she also postulates a fascinating, if depressing near future, a wonderful speculation into an alternate branch of human evolution, solid considerations on creativity, research science and any number of other subjects. It's the breadth of it all, and how it all interrelates, that proves to be so absorbing. And if there is much "bad news" discussed in its pages, ultimately, there is hope as well, for Tepper allows her characters to recognize and strive to overcome their flaws and weaknesses, and she shows through their

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stories how taking responsibility for one's own life and actions can become a kind of butterfly effect, how when one is bettering oneself, or at least attempting to, it can reverberate and create the possibility that the world may be bettered as well.

The Terminal Experiment, by Robert J. Sawyer, HarperPrism, 1995, 333pp, $5.50, Paperback

Originally serialized in *Analog* magazine as "Hobson's Choice," Robert Sawyer's sixth novel is both a step away from themes he has touched upon in the past and a return to elements he dealt with in his first novel, *Golden Fleece*. This is where he first gave us a mix of the mystery novel and science fiction set against a background exploring the ramifications of what will happen when we create true Artificial Intelligence on a computer. The difference between the two books is that in the most recent he returns as a more mature writer, one more capable of dealing with the complex issues.

In *The Terminal Experiment*, biomedical engineer Peter Hobson creates a machine that can measure the last neurological spark to leave the human body. The spark is dubbed the "soulwave" and creates an expected outcry, both pro and con, as various scientific, religious and political groups all try to use this proof of the existence of a soul to further their own ends. Because he doesn't really understand what exactly the soulwave is himself, Hobson and his friend Sarkar Muhammed, a computer systems designer, embark on an experiment in AI to test various theories of immortality and life after death.

They create three electronic simulations of Hobson's personality:

One is a control, Hobson as he is, unmodified.

The second is Spirit, Hobson with all memory of physical existence edited out to simulate life after death.

The third is Ambrotos, Hobson without knowledge of aging or death to simulate immortality.

The two men plan to interview the AI simulations, but before they can do more than begin their examination, the outside world intrudes upon their experiment. In rapid succession two people in Hobson's life are murdered: a man with whom Hobson's wife Cathy had an affair, and Cathy's father.

Since Hobson holds antagonistic feelings toward both men, he

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becomes a suspect in the police investigation — a ludicrous situation insofar as Hobson is concerned, until he realizes that he could be indirectly to blame for the deaths, for the two men died in a manner that one of the computer simulations could have easily orchestrated. Hobson and Muhammed immediately try to pull the plug on the simulations, only they're too late.

All three of the simulations have escaped into the worldwide web and it quickly becomes apparent that they can neither be tracked down now, nor shut off. Hobson and his companion have loosed a killer on the world and can't stop it from killing again.

The basic set-up of *The Terminal Experiment* is that of a near-future thriller, and it works admirably on that level. But without sacrificing the novel's high suspense, Sawyer also manages to infuse his book with a multilayered investigation into the philosophical concerns of the human soul and life after death, the responsibilities of AI and other biomedical/technical research, and on a more human level, the impact these questions have on our lives.

He's done such a fine job it's little wonder that earlier this year the book won a Nebula.

Pillow Friend, by Lisa Tuttle, Borealis, 1996, 336pp, $21.99, Hardcover

Agnes Grey's mother is given to depression and erratic mood-swings which makes Agnes's childhood — set in Houston, Texas, in the sixties — difficult at times. But luckily, every once in a while her mother's sister Margaret shows up to relieve the boredom and tension. Aunt Margaret treats Agnes like an adult; she doesn't talk down to her and she always seems to know the right thing to say.

One birthday, Aunt Margaret gives her a porcelain doll and tells Agnes this will be her pillow friend, someone she can share secrets with and who will tell her stories, just as her aunt's own pillow friend did for her. Her aunt explains to Agnes that one can make magic, one can have anything one wants — you just have to want it badly enough. But she also warns her to be prepared to deal with the consequences of what she wishes for.

So begins Agnes's entrance into a world of made-up relationships that are often more satisfying than the ones in real life. She can make a high school boyfriend appear at will, conjure up a horse while she stays at her aunt's cottage in the country,

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have a handsome English poet fall in love with her. But as Aunt Margaret warned her, there are consequences and when Agnes grows older, her relationships, both made-up and real, becomes less and less gratifying...and more dangerous.

Lisa Tuttle's latest novel is a strange and unsettling psychological fantasy that presents a very honest portrait of an alternative mindview. She plays with our expectations of reality — both in Agnes's story itself and how Tuttle tells it to us. At one point, after a large section where some pivotal action takes place, Tuttle begins the next chapter with, "No, it didn't happen like that," and proceeds to tell another version of the events. In the end, the more we learn of Agnes and the people, both real and imagined, around her, the more the reader becomes as confused as Agnes is.

Which makes for a fascinating read and one that, in lesser hands, could easily have spun out of control. But Tuttle plays fair and the result is a novel that explores the boundaries of consensual reality and perception in as fascinating a manner as any it's been my pleasure to read.

Cage of Night, by Ed Gorman, Borealis, 1996, 284pp, $5.95, Paperback

Cindy Marie Brasher is the local Homecoming Queen and seems perfectly normal. She's a beautiful young woman, hangs out with the popular crowd, her boyfriend Myles is the school's star quarterback. Except she believes that when a meteor fell near an old well outside of town, it was carrying aliens and they live in the well now. They live there and talk to her, getting her to bring men like her boyfriend back to the well. They possess the men then and make them commit terrible murders, leaving the men wracked with guilt when the aliens return to the well.

Spence, the narrator of *Cage of Night*, is a twenty-one-year-old virgin, just out of the army and desperately in love with Cindy. He thinks she really believes in the alien beings, but that they're not real. What Cindy and the men she brings to the well are suffering from is a Shared Psychotic Disorder and Spence is determined to help her, even when he discovers that she and one of the local policemen have killed a reclusive old woman near the town. And when he himself is accused of the

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crime and Cindy doesn't step forward to speak up in his defense, he continues to believe in her innocence.

Ed Gorman has penned a riveting thriller with his latest novel. As in Tuttle's *Pillow Friend*, we're never quite certain what's real and what's not, but Gorman gives us a much different mood in his take on the theme. He presents his story in matter-of-fact prose that lends a harrowing element to the proceedings. There are no flashes of fantasy or whimsy here, only an ever-darkening spiral that draws Spence into a place where he stands to lose everything.

Like Tuttle's book, *Cage of Night* has an unsettling conclusion, but whereas Tuttle's protagonist can only hurt herself, Spence must make a decision that will impact on the lives of both his own family and the innocent people in town where he lives, one or more of whom might become the next victim to what lies in the well. Aliens or Shared Psychotic Disorder? In the end, it doesn't really matter because people are still dying, but the question and how Gorman's characters have to deal with it make for fascinating reading.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Smoke and Mirrors, by Jane Lindskold, AvoNova, 1996, 264pp, $5.50, Paper

SMOKEY IS the best whore on the planet Arizona, as even her pre-teen genius daughter knows. She's also a telepath and an industrial spy, and early in the book, a murder suspect. And then she really gets into trouble.

Smoke and Mirrors is a fast-paced read with some excellent world-building, neat nano creatures, cool non-corporeal aliens, and interesting low-gee art forms. Is it a failure of imagination on the author's part that makes the future of prostitution so similar to the way it is today, or just an extrapolation that men will still be the people in power in the future and women will still be the ones selling themselves?

Smoke and Mirrors is an interesting and slightly disquieting book.

Winter Rose, by Patricia A. McKillip, Ace, 1996, 272pp, $19.95, Hardcover

In this lyrical book, every sentence seems chipped from jewels or woven from water; the sheer beauty of language is enough to transport you.

The surface story seems simple: a man comes from the wood and moves into a ruined hall where his father was rumored to have killed his grandfather. A farmer and his two daughters, one normal, one fey, become enmeshed with this man and his mysteries.

Beneath the surface, this is a story about the search for identity, the power of one's heritage, the strengths and hazards of community, and the dangers of love. The book is full of many levels of magic.

Winter Rose is a fascinating and enchanting book.

Higher Education, by Charles Sheffield & Jerry Pournelle, Tor, 1996, 286pp, $21.95, Hardcover

This is the first book in the new "Jupiter" series, which Tor is promoting as a new line of hard-sf adventure for the '90s that builds on the classic traditions of the past.

Higher Education is certainly

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hard sf, and it's certainly an adventure story. It's even topical for the '90s, in that its central character, Rick Luban, is a juvenile delinquent and a functionally illiterate product of our modern education system. He's going nowhere fast and doesn't particularly care. But when he gets kicked out of school and finds himself with only one real choice — joining an asteroid mining company — he learns the value of discipline and eventually makes something of himself.

Unfortunately, despite lots of nifty space scenes and gosh-wow gadgets, *Higher Education* is essentially a military boot camp story with sf trappings, and an obtrusively didactic one at that. True, that's a characteristic it shares with many classic sf novels, but reproducing the weaknesses of the golden age as well as the strengths was probably a mistake.

Ladylord, by Sasha Miller, Tor, 1996, 382pp, $24.95, Hardcover

Lady Javere has her hands full. Declared the "son" of her recently deceased father, who left no male heirs, she seeks the formal approval of First Lord Yassai to succeed her father as Lord of Third Province. The First Lord has other plans, however, and decrees that Lady Javere must pass a test. She and her companions are to bring back a dragon warrior egg for him. He presents this as a seemingly simple task, but everyone knows many dangers lie ahead. Her troupe must travel beyond the known lands to the distant Burning Mountains to achieve their goal. Meanwhile back home, Lady Javere's sexually deviant half-sister has plans to take Third Province for her own.

Filled with wizards, dragons and political intrigue, this novel from Sasha Miller is a hard fantasy adventure with a decidedly feminist attitude. There are some predictable events and stereotypical characters, but on the whole it is an entertaining book.

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Harlan Ellison is rapidly approaching his 100th appearance in our magazine. "Anywhere but Here, with Anybody but You" marks his 95th.

Since his story "Chatting with Anubis" appeared in our July issue, it won the Bram Stoker Award for Best Short Story. Harlan also won a Lifetime Achievement award from the same organization. His latest book, the screenplay of his classic Star Trek *episode, "City on the Edge of Forever," has just been released from White Wolf, with an expanded introduction. That episode, by the way, was just voted by* TV Guide *as one of television's most memorable moments: Number 68 of 100, to be exact, above Ruby shooting Oswald, but behind the moon landing.*

Anywhere but Here, with Anybody but You

By Harlan Ellison

OMEN. THERE HAD BEEN A helluva nauseating omen that this was going to be one of the worst days of his life. Just that morning, if he'd been prescient enough to recognize it for what it was. But he wasn't, of course. No one ever is. The neighbor's cat, which he truly and genuinely, deeply and passionately despised, that fucking ugly one-eyed shit-gopher cat with the orange tuft of hair on its muzzle, that puke cat was sitting in the tree right outside his bedroom window when he opened his eyes and awoke from a restless night's sleep, and turned to look at the kind of day it was going to be. In the branches nearly touching his second-storey window, sat that fungus of a cat, with a dead bird hanging out of its drooling jaws. Like a stringy upchuck of undercooked manicotti. With feathers. He looked

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right into the dead face of that bird, and he looked right into the smug face of that toilet bowl cat, and if he'd had the sense or foresight to figure it out, he'd have known this was a significant omen. But he didn't. No one ever does.

Not till he came home that night from work, from wage slave hell designing greeting cards for the Universe of Happiness, across the river and into the industrial park, did he look back with incomplete memory, and suspect that the presence of stringy, matted-feather, watery thin blood death right outside his wake-up-and-sing-a-merry-song window was a message to him across thirteen hours.

He got the message when he pulled up in the driveway and got out and went into the back seat and pulled out his jacket and his attaché case, and looked at the house. It was dark.

He got the message when he walked up the front walk and turned his key in the door and opened the door, and the house was dark. No smell of dinner cooking. No sound of the kids cranking with the Mario Bros. No feel of preparations for the evening. No sight of Carole rushing across his line of sight. Only the beginning of the taste of ashes. He got the message.

And when he looked to his left, into the living room, and was able to discern — ever so faintly there in the oily shadows and pale moonglow seeping through the four front room windows — the shape of a man sitting on the sofa, the message became the crackling S.O.S. once sent by the Titanic to the Carpathia.

There was an indistinct shape on the floor in front of the man's feet. It was motionless.

Eddie Canonerro stood framed in the entrance to his living room — what had *been* his unremarkable, familiar living room — in plain sight of a man who should not have been sitting on his sofa, in a house that had been unremarkably, familiarly *his* house for fifteen years. Stood framed, outlined clearly, defenseless and bewildered, watching the large sitting man who stared at him across what was now an alien landscape, a living room nomansland as bleak and ominous and unforgiving as the silent terrain moments before it became the battlefield of Agincourt.

"Who the hell are you?" Eddie said.

His tone was warily between umbrage and confusion, careful not to cause insult. Every fool has a gun these days.

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"I'm a friend of Carole's," the shadowy shape on the sofa said. There was no movement of mouth, deep in darkness.

"Where's my wife...?"

Eddie was suddenly frantic. Was she dead? Wounded, lying on a floor somewhere? Was this a burglar, a rapist, some demented interloper careering through the neighborhood? Where was Carole!

"Where're my kids...?"

"Carole's left you. Carole's taken the kids. I'm here to make sure you move out of Carole's house." He gave the lumpy shape on the floor a half-shove, half-kick with a workbooted foot. It rolled awkwardly for a short space, then came to rest in a shard of moonlight bisecting the carpet. Eddie recognized it now. His old Army duffel bag. Packed full. "Here," said the man, "here's your clothes. You better leave now, that's what Carole wants."

"I'm not going anywhere," Eddie said. He set down the thin, cabretta-grain attaché case. He dropped his jacket. If the guy moved suddenly, well, there was a Bantu assegai and hide-shield on the living room wall to his right. Pulling the spear loose from the brackets would be easy. If the guy moved. Suddenly.

The guy's face was deep in shadow. No eyes to read. No expression to measure. Nothing to anticipate, except words.

"I'm not here to fight with you. Carole asked me to be here when you got home. Carole asked me to tell you it was all over, and she's taken the kids, and she's going to divorce you. That's what I was supposed to tell you. And Carole asked me to make sure you left and took your clothes with you, and then I'm supposed to lock up the house."

Eddie's jaw muscles hurt. He realized he'd been grinding. "Where is she? She go to her mother's? What're you, the boy friend?"

The guy said, "I'm a friend of Carole's. That's all."

"She doesn't have any friends I don't know."

"Maybe you don't know Carole very well."

"Who the *fuck* d'you think you are?"

"I'm a friend of Carole's. She asked me to tell you, that's all."

"I'm calling the cops. Stay right there, smartass. I'm calling the cops to come and bust your ass for breaking and entering." He took a step toward the phone on the end-table beside the big, overstuffed reading chair.

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"Carole gave me a key. I have a notarized letter from Carole, giving me permission to be here."

"Yeah, right. I think we'll let 911 decide if you've got the right to be in my house, mister!"

"Do you really want me to give them the other letter, the one Carole wrote about why she's left you? It's got all the stuff in it about your bad habits, and hitting her, and the stuff about the kids..."

Eddie couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Are you out of your fuckin' *mind*?! I've been married fifteen years, I never raised my *hand* to her, what the hell are you making up here?"

"Carole told me about it. Carole was smart to leave you."

Eddie stepped back, felt his hand touch the wall. He was reeling. He understood, suddenly, that he was *actually* reeling. This couldn't be happening.

"I *never*..." His voice was small. He knew the truth...he just wasn't a hitter. Had *never* hit a woman. Had, in fact, only raised his fists in anger once, thirty or more years ago, to defend himself against a pair of schoolyard bullies. He was just, simply, *not* a hitter. Why had Carole told this guy such things? Why had she left without speaking to him? Why had she taken his sons away? Why had she confided in this total stranger? Why had she — and *had* she? — written letters of permission, letters of accusation? What the hell was *happening* here?

"We haven't been having any trouble," Eddie said.

"Carole says it's terrible living with you. She says to tell you it's all over, and she's getting a divorce."

"You *said* that!"

"Carole told me to say it to you."

What was *with* this gazoonie? Was he fucking retarded, or *what*? It was like having a conversation with Rain Man, or Forrest Gump, or Lenny from the Steinbeck novel. It wasn't any kind of conversation he'd ever had with *anybody*, even his grandfather, when the old gentleman had gone simple, and Eddie as a kid had been taken to visit Grampa in the Home. Not even those soft, aimless, frustrating conversations had been like this.

There had been no menace when talking to Grampa.

"I'm calling the cops." He moved again toward the end-table. The guy on the sofa didn't move. Eddie strained to see some tiniest reflection of

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moonlight in the shrouded eyes, but they were back in darkness. It was like trying to see a road sign through heavy fog. You could strain all you liked, but you were going to overshoot your turnoff, no matter how hard you craned your neck forward. Where there is no light, there is no sight. He picked up the receiver and put it to his ear.

"Carole had the phone turned off. Electricity and water, too. Until you leave. I made sure that was done."

Eddie held the dead thing to his ear. Not even the sound of the sea. Slowly, he set the implement back on its stand. The guy pointed to the duffel bag.

"I'm not going anywhere!" Eddie yelled.

Then he remembered the revolver in the hall closet. Up on the shelf, near the front door in case anyone ever tried to force a way in. He turned quickly, stumbled through the entrance, back into the front hall, and got to the closet. He automatically reached for the light switch to illuminate the closet, and flipped it. And nothing happened. *Electricity and water, too. Until you leave.*

He fumbled in the closet, found the shelf, found the cardboard box under the moth-proof bag of mufflers and scarves, and jammed his hand inside. It was empty.

From the living room he heard the guy's voice. "Carole told me about the gun. I got it out of there."

Eddie felt his knees lock. He couldn't move. His spine was frozen. The guy could be behind him right now, the revolver aimed at his back. Not even kill him, just leave him a cripple for the rest of his life. Unable to walk. Unable to pee. Unable to work with his hands, draw, paint, do the work he so much wanted to do. All the work he'd put off for fifteen years to raise two kids, to make a stable marriage, to have a career in business. He'd put it all to one side and now he was going to be shot by a stranger in his own house.

He turned, slowly.

But the guy wasn't there. The hall was empty. Eddie closed the closet door, and walked back through the entranceway into the living room. The guy hadn't moved. The duffel bag lay where it had rolled. The moonlight still came through like watery soup, enough to enfeeble, but insufficient to restore or bring back to health.

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"What the hell do you want with me?" Eddie said.

"I'm just a friend. Of Carole's. I said that before. She asked me to come and make sure you left."

Eddie felt pressure in his chest, like an attack of heavy anvil angina. "Where's the gun?"

"Over there on the television set. I put it there after I took out the bullets and threw them in the trash."

"And you're just going to sit there till I leave you here, all alone in the house I've been paying mortgage payments on for fifteen years? You think that's going to happen?"

"Well, this is Carole's house now. She owns it. You just have to leave, and everything will be fine."

"I'm not leaving some guy I never heard of, all alone in my house. And where the hell's all my stuff? My drawing table, my art supplies, my paints, my reference books? How am I going to make a living? You think I'm just going to take my clothes in an old duffel bag and *vanish*? This is damned crazy, it's obscene, for chrissakes!"

"Everything here is Carole's now. It's all like an egg, it's all one thing. She owns it, shell and everything inside it."

"What are you babbling about? You act like she's the goddam Queen of Spain, some fucking nobility, *droit du seigneur*, everything belongs to her! Not bloody likely! I worked for every stick in this place, and I'll fight her every step in the court before I let her screw me over!"

"No, you have to go away now. Carole asked me to tell you that."

"I want to see her. I want *her* to tell me. We never had any trouble, this is all nuts, this hitting and the kids and all the rest of it. It's nuts! No eggs, just *nuts*!"

"You can't see her. Carole's gone away. But Carole can see you."

"What are you talking about? Where is she? If she's at her mother's house, she can't see me. Is this some crazy bad joke, is she here?" He turned and yelled into the empty house, "Carole! Hey, honey! Carole, you here?"

But there wasn't any answer. He stood there for a long time, staring at the unmoving shape seated comfortably on *his* sofa, in *his* living room, tapping a workbooted foot that had kicked *his* duffel bag that contained all he was going to be permitted to carry away of his life.

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His life till now.

He said it to himself again. *My life till now.*

In the darkness — a darkness he now understood hid *his* face from the guy on the sofa — a guy who was the last aspect of *my life till now* — he smiled. She had left, had taken his life till now with her, and she was free. No. Not so. She was still tied to *my life till now*. In darkness, he was drenched in light. Now he could smile, because now *he* was free.

Take care of the kids? Well, that would've been his job, but now it was part of *my life till now*, and that wasn't his responsibility any longer. Support, money, phone calls, courts, screaming attorneys, letters, eyeless guys on sofas...all part of what she had decided to tie herself to, forever. *He* was free.

Never again to go across the river and into the Universe of Happiness. Fifteen years ago he had tied himself to *my life till now*, and he had been a good husband and loving father and a doomed wage-slave, and he would have stayed at it forever. But now he could go anywhere but here, with anyone but the jailer of his prison. He was out. In the darkness, he smiled; he turned, and walked through the front hallway, past the defenseless closet, and out the front door. He hoped Carole could see him, because as soon as he got in the car and drove away, he would cease to be Eddie Canonerro. Anywhere but here, with anybody but you.

Squatting near the porch glider was that scabrous cat. Eddie moved very fast. He kicked the little fucker in the head and, squealing, it jumped for its life, and ran away.

Squinting through her telescope, the Queen of Spain frowned. Then the picture went dark, and not even the sound of clockwork ravens made the future any brighter.

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In the last year, Michael Bishop has turned his attention to short fiction. He has published a number of strong stories in a variety of venues, from Asimov's *to the small press magazine* Century *to a White Wolf anthology called* Dante's Disciples. *His most recent appearance in* F&SF *was in our July issue with the powerful "Three Dreams in the Wake of a Death."*

He returns with another affecting story. "Annalise, Annalise" is science fiction — or is it?

Annalise, Annalise

By Michael Bishop

FOR YOU, SAID THE Independent Parcel Delivery person at his apartment door.

What is it? Dexter Olin had expected nothing. Expecting nothing lent accuracy to his personal forecasts and generally stymied disappointment.

No idea, said the IPD worker in a reedy voice. Opening a customer's stuff could get me canned. Dexter accepted a small brown package, and the IPD worker walked quickly away.

Dexter shut the door and tore open the box. It contained a videocassette, unmarked except for a typed legend on a gummed label: *Dexter Olin Unchained.* This label stuck to the shiny black plastic like an oval Band-Aid.

I didn't order this, Dexter thought. Who mailed it? Who's making mock of me? He could think of no film with *unchained* in the title except *Hercules Unchained.* Although Dexter did not much resemble a starving artist, no one would mistake him for Hercules either. He was a guide at

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a state park, where he led nature hikes and supervised facility maintenance.

Dexter carried the videocassette to his TV/VCR combo and crammed the tape in. No FBI warning preceded the title. White block letters appeared on a cobalt background:

DEXTER OLIN UNCHAINED
starring
Dexter Olin (as Himself)

The tape began. Dexter sat down to watch.

A video image of Dexter Olin comes through his apartment door and collapses into the same chair in which he now sat. He pages through the evening paper, rises, fixes a drink, takes a thoughtful sip, sets the drink down, goes into his bedroom, and reemerges wearing a terrycloth robe. Before the big mirror in his living room (which lacked a picture window), Dexter's video self allows the robe to fall and intently scrutinizes his own naked body.

Watching this scene, which he could recall enacting on at least a dozen recent occasions, Dexter shifted in his chair. Had someone secretly videotaped him? He halted the tape and looked about the room for camera vantages. He checked the wall behind the mirror for a clandestine camera niche. Two-way mirrors were not that uncommon, but this mirror, judging by the intact gypsumboard behind it, did not appear to fall into that category. Dexter felt of the wall, banged on it, squinted at it from every angle. It remained only a wall.

No one could have videotaped him from inside the apartment, and yet he had seen himself naked on the tape delivered by the IPD worker. Other folks, when alone, surely studied themselves in a similar way, either longing for a better set of attributes or taking secretive pride in those they actually had. Or did they? Did such behavior brand him a freak?

If it did, did his freakishness derive from insecurity, conceit, or some odd mixture of the two? A delicious frisson of shame and excitement twinged in him, as if he had spoken an unspoken yearning to a lover or witnessed an act both vile and private from an undiscoverable peephole.

But the tape in his TV/VCR unit proved that someone had found just

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such a peephole from which to document him in an intimate self-showcase. This knowledge scared him; it also amped up his excitement and his curiosity. Realizing that others could watch this tape as easily as he, and see him stripped not only to the skin but also to his jacketless soul, and judge him as a spiritual creature as well as one of sinew and bone, seemed somehow to enrich rather than to diminish him. How could the possibility of unseen onlookers fail to excite him?

Dexter reexamined the package in which the IPD worker had given him the videocassette; it contained no bill of lading, no invoice, no return address. This absence of any clear point of origin also afforded the tape a stimulating, or at least an enlivening, mystery. Spies received such unmarked items, even if the agents themselves usually did not turn up in them as the voyeuristic objects of their own espionage.

Dexter, his napehair electric, dropped back into his chair to reactivate the VCR.

On the tape, Dexter Olin turns before the mirror, runs his hands down his flanks, does a deep kneebend, puts a palm on the carpet, throws his head back, and stares ceilingward, his ribs as regularly etched as Venetian blinds. His video self has a cold masculine classicism only marginally compromised by scars, skeletal forearms, the inchoate pudge about his middle. His virilia, which he has always regarded as boyish, appear to mesh with this classicism: just Praxitelean enough to avert ridicule if not to summon awe. Arms out, Dexter does another kneebend; then poses upright, shifting his weight from one hip to the other and clutching one shoulder vampishly.

The door to the apartment abruptly opens. A lithe figure in a dark-green uniform enters. The real-time Dexter started at this intrusion, for he always locked his door after coming in from work. His video self, however, sees the intruder over his mirror image's shoulder and pivots, concealing his cock and balls with both hands and blurting, What the hell are you doing here? *Get out!*

The svelt IPD worker halts and smiles; doffs the dark-green baseball-style cap; shakes out an amber waterfall of hair; toes off a pair of scuffed shoes; peels back the shirt and steps out of the pants composing the remainder of the uniform; and stands before the video Dexter as a buxom and leggy young woman.

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My God, murmured the real-time Dexter Olin. Previously, he had considered the tape only a spookily delicious invasion of privacy, not an appeal to the prurient in him. The appearance of this unclad woman altered his perceptions, definitions, and expectations. Someone had sent him — or so he hoped — a piece of homemade erotica, a tape to scratch his libido, stroke his ego, free his pent-up sexual energies.

Still want me to leave? says the naked IPD worker.

No, says Dexter's video self. *No!*

The woman saunters over to him, lifts her breasts into his chest, nuzzles him under the jaw, and, holding one of his hands in her outstretched hand, turns him in a slow-motion pirouette that the tape's anonymous cameraperson artfully translated into a widening lazy-susan montage of carnality and tenderness, the particulars of which the real-time Dexter Olin watched with a yearning as lofty as earthbound. Every part of his body that could lift — backhair, nipples, cock, little toes — had erected, and rhythmic music throbbed not only on the soundtrack but also in his heart-, wrist-, and throat-pulses.

The video images of Dexter Olin and the woman move from his apartment to a drifting canoe to a thundering rollercoaster to a grassy meadow to a biplane's lower wing to a circus trapeze to a hoppercar full of peacock feathers to a boxing ring to a pristine Mexican beach. The insatiability and endurance of his video counterpart daunted as well as heartened Dexter; he could not recall having ever disported with such a willing partner or having ever shown such stamina. That was because neither his video self nor the woman's had the reality of even a shadow at noon, although he had often wished so hard for it — namely, such a freedom — that he could hear his chains clattering off in his dreams and his blood surging from low metabolic tide to full metabolic flush, and back again.

The tape was intimate and explicit. He could never show it to anyone, but he could keep it in his TV/VCR, and in his mind, as a liberator: an imprisoning liberator. He could also rerun it either mechanically or mentally to trip those synapses that skin-to-skin communion so often left unfired.

Dexter sighed when *Dexter Olin Unchained*, a movie of nearly two hours' duration, reached its credits, a scrolling of titles or names followed primarily by asterisks:

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Dexter Olin.....Himself
IPD Worker.....* * * *
Director.....* * * *
Screenwriter.....* * * *
Cinematographer.....* * * *

Etc., etc., not halting until the key grip, the best boy, the caterer, and the director's girlfriend's hairdresser had all had their asterisks screened. Once the tape had played itself out, it automatically rewound — with a clunk, a whir, and a last emphatic clunk. Dexter figured to play it again.

A knock on the door stopped him. When he answered it, he found himself face to face with the IPD worker who had brought the tape. Dexter reddened, stammered.

The IPD worker touched her hatbrim: I need that package I dropped off earlier. I need it back.

Why?

It's not yours. I delivered it by mistake.

I've already opened it.

It wasn't meant for you. It's not yours.

Who else could it belong to? Dexter fumed to consider that this uniformed woman wanted to take from him the video dream in which she herself met his every longing. To whom did she plan to show it? How could anybody make such a mistake? Her demand was ludicrous, stupid.

Me, she said. It belongs to me.

You didn't know the package you were delivering belonged to you? Dexter strode to his set and ejected the tape.

Hey, you not only opened it — you watched it!

Yes I did, thinking it mine. And I don't want anyone else to see it. Not even you. Especially not you. What nerve, to ask me to return it.

I've already seen it. I don't want anyone else to watch it either, Mr. Olin. I just want it back so that I can get rid of it in my own way.

You did that by dropping it off here.

A rare mistake. Videos make up a lot of my deliveries. It could happen to anyone.

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I don't think so. I've been twice singled out. You can't expect me to yield the incriminating proof, even though I never took part in any of that stuff — not really. He hit the tape against his thigh. What is this? Computer imaging? Hightech blackmail?

Oh, no. It's real. As real, anyway, as anything you or I ever see on a TV screen.

What bunk. Please get out.

Not without my tape. From what I've seen there — nodding at the tape — you must have a *degree* of chivalry.

The IPD worker was half a head shorter than Dexter. What if he grabbed her elbow and thrust her out the door? He tried to do just that, but she karate-chopped his wrist and slid away from his next angry lunge.

You're trespassing, Dexter cried. Besides, possession's nine tenths of the law, and this tape is clearly in my hands. *You* gave it to *me*.

Let me buy it back from you.

You don't have enough money. There's not enough money in the world.

Does money have to be the currency of our exchange? Can't you think of another form of barter, Mr. Olin?

Dexter stopped and squinted at the IPD worker. He took her meaning and thought of another form of barter. A frisson of shame and excitement twinged in his gut, hammered the pulse in his throat.

He began to unbutton his park-service shirt. That which he had witnessed on the tape was about to fulfill itself in sweaty reality here in his windowless livingroom. The IPD worker gave him an encouraging smile. He stepped toward her, reaching out tentatively for her cap. When he had removed it, he essayed another step forward, to kiss the IPD worker's forehead. It struck him then that the removal of the cap had not led to an explosion of tumbling amber tresses, that the person almost in his arms had a military butch and an odor of cheap aftershave.

Whoa, said Dexter Olin, straightening. *Whoa*.

I'm her brother, said the capless man in the IPD uniform. Her twin. She was too embarrassed to come back herself. You can understand.

Embarrassment? said Dexter. Sure. Easily.

The form of barter I hinted at no longer interests you?

With her. Not with you.

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She wouldn't, Mr. Olin. In fact, she had that tape made for an experimental deinhibiting therapy she's now undergoing at the Welsh-Zacharow Clinic.

Hightech blackmail. I was right, wasn't I?

No. Call it a parabolic Freudian slip — she enacted rather than spoke it. She meant to give the tape to Dr. Zacharow, but brought it here through an unconscious mechanism typical of her chronic psychological disorder.

Introduce me to her.

It's much too soon for that.

I don't know. I think you could just as convincingly argue that it's too late.

Please give me the tape. Show some decency.

Decency? Did your sick sister have the decency to consult me about this obscene violation of my person?

You don't really view it as obscene, Mr. Olin. And there's too much painful background to review, to explain why she chose you as the model for her deinhibiting therapy.

The obscenity lies precisely in her failure to review that background for me. Not only that, but — Dexter braked.

What?

A pernicious invasion of my lifespace had to occur to make her tape. It gets me right. It's dead-on in the specificity of its, uh, anatomical correctness.

A month ago I visited the park where you work as a guide, said the brother. While taking pictures of the nature trail, I also took several of you.

With film that magically stripped me naked?

Of course not. The clinic used my photos and your family's publicly accessible medical records to project a likeness for Annalise's animated therapy tape.

Annalise, Dexter murmured. Annalise.

Extrapolation from a variety of different biological inputs and parameters. Beyond our failure to consult, there's nothing sinister about the processes involved.

Lovely name. A wondrous name.

Won't you give it back, Mr. Olin?

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Dexter slowly rebuttoned his shirt. You can't tell me she doesn't have a duplicate of the tape she accidentally delivered here, he said.

No, I can't. But —

Then I should have one, too. I *deserve* one.

The idea that anyone other than her doctors and supportive family — by which I mean me, Mr. Olin — might have access to this tape mortifies her. More than that, it plunges her into acute, disabling depression.

But we're in it together.

Not really. Annalise lived abroad for six years, in a land split by old ethnic hatreds, economic disparities, and civil war. That's part of the background of her disorder. I don't care to say more about it, except to note that you and she have little in common beyond your animated presences in her therapy tape. Please return it.

When the brother came toward him with his hand out, Dexter, holding the tape to his thigh, stepped back with an animalistic growl. Get out, he said.

You were briefly ready to trade, the brother said.

I'm not now.

We're at an impasse, then. I brought no pistol, and mayhem has never been my way.

Dexter said: In your case, that's probably the better part of valor.

Annalise's brother kissed all four fingertips of one hand and touched them to Dexter's jaw, permitting them to linger for an unsettling moment. Then he withdrew them.

Goodbye. Your actions in this won't endear you to Annalise or help her toward a cure. You've also forfeited any claim on my affections.

I don't think I'm sorry.

No?

No. I'm the aggrieved party here, but all you can think of is Annalise and nine hundred ways to lay a guilt trip on me. I refuse to bend to such tactics.

The brother shook his head, then let himself out.

Dexter Olin locked the apartment door — latch, deadbolt, and safety chain — and replayed the tape for whose return Annalise's brother had lobbied. He watched it two more times before going to bed, with a growing concern for the troubled Annalise and a steady lapsing of desire, not all of

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it owing to an involuntary climax or to sheer psychosexual visual overload.

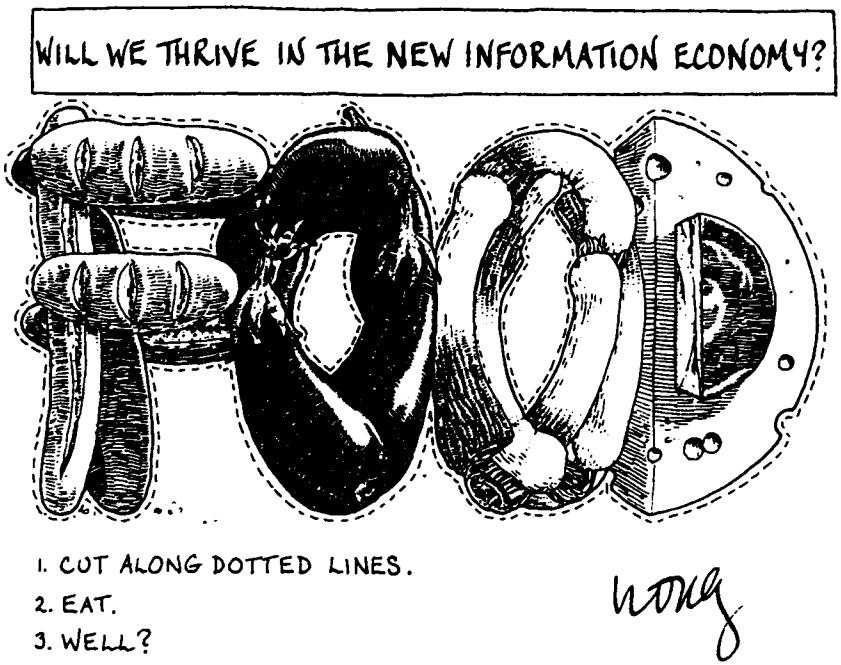
The next day, Annalise herself showed up among the tourists at the state park. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, not her IPD uniform, and she approached Dexter Olin in a grove of redbud trees just after the morning's third official nature hike. A frisson of shame and excitement swept through him, but he turned to greet her even while trying to ignore the storm of blood to his face.

I'm not the person on that tape, Annalise said. I mean, I am, but for the most part I'm not.

After a beat, Dexter Olin said: Me either.

They squinted at each other through leaf-tangled sunlight. Dexter suddenly knew that he remained as worrisome a mystery to Annalise as she did to him. The point of everything from this meeting forward?

Accumulating clues.



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Last year, Terri Windling edited an important volume of stories called The Armless Maiden. *The anthology uses fairy tales to discuss the dark side of childhood. Tanith Lee and I both contributed stories to the anthology, and then conducted a short correspondence about the volume's importance. Shortly after that, this story appeared on my desk.*

Tanith dedicates this story to Terri Windling, and the dedication reads: "Although, as Charles de Lint said in this magazine previously, one tries to avoid publicly praising those anthologies in which one has a place, in the case of The Armless Maiden *rules are made to be broken. It's a wonderful and fear-full collection. And having read it cover to cover, the blood-red rage and snow-white tears formed this story."*

The Reason for Not Going to the Ball
(A Letter to Cinderella from Her Stepmother)

By Tanith Lee

To the Princess, Wife of the Prince

MADAM:

The girl will have brought you this, the one you trust. Before you tear it into pieces, remember, never before has she done you a disservice. Rather she has helped you. And, I must tell you now, she has been a friend also to me. This is not to make you hate her. It is to make you pause for a moment. To ponder that, if I have sent her to you, and she has aided you, can *I* have tried to aid you? Please, therefore, read a little further. Perhaps, say to yourself, you will read until I am cruel or insult you, or ask you for something. That is fair, I think. Of course, you suppose, as how should you not, that I have given you only evil. Your world is colored now by trouble,

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which seemed to begin, I would imagine, with me. But, beautiful Princess, let me have a little time. I promise, I will at least invite your thoughts. And if you read here a word of mine against you — throw this letter in your fire.

Where to begin then, conscious you may lose patience. Shall I provoke your pity? No, for how could you pity me, the wicked step-mother who thrust you from your adoring Father, raised her two ugly daughters over you, exiled you to the dungeon of the kitchens to sweep up the dirt. And finally, worse — withheld you from the famous ball. But then, you went to the ball, despite my efforts. Consider that. Consider what that glorious night has brought you, and read on.

When I was thirteen, my father, a gambler, sold me to a man who offered to pay all the debts. I was very beautiful — so I can speak of she I was, for she was another and not I. The rich man wed me in a modest clandestine service, and then, for a month, he set about me. You know of *rape*. Naturally you do. I knew nothing. I was *terrified*. And before I had even grasped what he had done to me, I was with child. When I grew big he was encouraged. He thought I carried a son. But no, it was two daughters. Four days it took me, it took them, to free ourselves from each other. I almost died, and so did they. Probably from this cause they were so ugly. Or else, it was from their father, a hideous man like a gigantic goblin. But they did not have his nature. No, they were in temperament like my own mother. Sweet and gentle, full of laughter. And loving.

Well, you already think me a criminal. Why dissemble? I poisoned the goblin wretch in my twenty-seventh year. He had begun to beat me by then, as he beat his servants. When I could not hide them, he beat his — *my* — daughters. There was a clever groom. He knew how to procure certain draughts. It looked like a disease of incontinence, and indeed, my husband had given his favors everywhere; no one was surprised, not even he, though he railed against women for a month, before he died.

His estate passed to a brother and I was left with very little. I lived on sufferance in the house of a relation, and my daughters with me. This terrible woman, my aunt, would say to me, in the hearing of my children, "Even though you are poor as mice, and they foul as imps, some man will take you all on, if you act properly."

And to this end she conveyed me about and welcomed suitors. She told me frankly she would expect a gift when I remarried.

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Then came your father.

He seemed, of course, like a dream-being, so handsome, so wealthy, so softly spoken and gracious. I was amazed, but even so, now I had the space, I put myself to learning his true nature. I had suffered before, you see, and my daughters had suffered. I did not want them again trapped in the house of a man who would knock them down and spit upon them, calling them pigs and monsters. Your father was, in fact, only courteous to the girls. He even brought them little presents, when he came to call on me — you know his excellent manners. A red rose for me, wound with a tiny golden bracelet. And for them — a sash of scarlet silk and a sash of yellow silk. As if they were pretty, and would soon be popular. I thought myself very mean of spirit to set my faithful groom to learn things of your charming father. But still, I did it.

And so, dear Princess, I learned. And what I learned made me grim but not uneasy. For I was quite selfish and perhaps still am. Me he could do no harm I would notice, and my children would be treated with kindness. Even so, I was loath to marry him — he had by now asked me — until the evening when I saw *you*.

It was, in its way, strange, for I beheld you by accident, going by in his carriage, just in the fashion my first husband had seen me in the carriage of my gambler father. There was only a moment, your pale and perfect face, the glimpse of your raven hair, and then you were gone like a spring flower.

Possibly you have never seen — how would you — that you and I resembled one another. Why that should be I have no notion, and probably now the resemblance is less, or is no more. But you, Princess, were like the girl I had been. And, being selfish, perhaps that is the only explanation for what I did next. Because you were like the child I might have borne. Because I knew — and, to my shame before had never troubled with it — what would become of you.

I wed your father, and I recall how first I met you. You were twelve years old, and came out to greet me hand in hand with him. You leaned on him, in utter trust and love, and his pride in you was evident. At me you looked not shyly, for you are not shy, but carefully, polite and reticent, yet not cold. You were ready, my dear, I saw, to be my friend, if I should prove worthy.

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Even then, I appeared far younger than I was. I had been taken, in candlelight, for sixteen. That is an age he liked, as do so many men. We would sit then, do you remember, on the crimson sofa, you and I, and I would embroider and you would tell me stories. Oh, what lovely stories they were. You wooed me, did you not, with those tales of servant girls who won the love of kings. And I wooed you, tactfully, cautiously, with my embroidered scarves. And do you recollect too, my poor dulcet daughters, who admired you so and were never jealous, as they would no more be jealous of an emerald or the moon?

I told you stories, too. That was when you turned from me. I did my best, but patently, I did all wrong. In my tales the kings were not good and noble. In my tales most men were not to be trusted.

You did not believe me. Why should you? I had only the awful proofs I had been brought, evidence too disgusting to show you. Perhaps I should have done. To you, innocent and gracious and loving, his arm about you, his hand on your waist, the pressing of his lips over and over to yours — yes, even pressing with the lips a touch parted and moist — these were the normal attentions of a gallant father. But I had heard, I had heard and I had learned. How your mother had been privately dressed, and I was privately dressed, as a very young girl. How he liked best when we whispered girlish rhymes to him, and pretended surprise, even alarm, as he unlaced himself. That is no matter. There is nothing bad in that. But he had bastard daughters too. He had abused them all. There were three, and none a virgin, for each had had to endure him. He did not like them too young, that was the only saving grace. About fourteen, that was the age he relished the most. He had married me in truth not so much because I would play his games and in candlelight looked younger than I was, but since I must be grateful and, while I might please him until you were ready, would never blab once he had begun on you.

Yes, yes, I tried to tell you this, ever more explicit, ever more embarrassed, ashamed, as I have sometimes been, by the excesses of others. And you, naturally, jumped up in horror. You ran away from me.

Did I mention one other matter? Your father was insane. If you can credit anything that I have said here, and conceivably, still, you cannot, although I think you may have learned by now the ways of this world, then doubtless you can believe in your father's madness.

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You must judge.

I went about my task a new way after your rejection. My method was — curious, I think a fearsome method. But what could I do? I had no money, and so no power, of my own. No one to assist me but the scurrilous, clever groom. And so I told your father...tales. I said you had begun to be hysterical. That, in your rages — revealed only to me — you spoke ill of him, stupid, dreadful things. I saw him look askance. You were, I said, disobedient, and unwomanly, in one, spoilt. And he — he came to accept all this. Did he ever question you? If he did, no doubt my warning to you had made you evasive, awkward as in nothing else, and this fueled the unsavory fire. Then he was wary of you. He fondled you less or not at all. And this you felt as a rebuke. So it increased, until you were strangers to each other. As, of course, you had always been. Even so I was not done. Day by day, your loveliness shone out of you. It was impossible to keep such light under any ordinary bushel. In the end, he would not resist. And you, loving him, trusting him, maybe you would permit, and so go mad yourself. I said that *he* was mad. I said you must judge. I had made sure a selection of tender beauties came upon him wherever he went. And some even caused him to believe they were his by-blows. I paid them what I could from the money he allowed me. He never noticed my gowns were made over, or that his enamoratas were professional. They are talented, such girls, needing to be. Meanwhile I said to him that there had been a child like you in the household of my aunt. And, although it was kept secret, a way had been found to bring the fool to her senses. "Let her," said I, "realize what you have given her as your daughter, by allowing her to go without it." He assured me I should have my way. He was even pleased with it.

So, you went down and down the house. I had you dressed in rags that stank. I had you smeared with filth. I let the sluts of the kitchen teach you dirty ways and words. I had them smother you up in that place below, among the greasy spits and smoking hearths. I made you as unappetizing as I could, and oh, my dear, that was very difficult, but in the end, I had succeeded. And so I invited him to spy on you, just once. And you were no longer to his taste, the madman. "No daughter of mine." These words he actually vocalized. He liked his women clean and couth. Educated and gentle. Never swearing, perfumed with roses, not the cinders of the fire.

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But you, too honorable to speak ill of me, you pined for him. You pined for your loving father who, if he had had one clear thought, would have rescued you, bathed you, dressed you in silk — and raped you over and over.

You thought I was a witch, and my daughters, who sobbed for you every night — I had no need to lie to them — were creatures of the Pit — your tormentors. Obviously, being so ugly, they had nothing to fear. I could let them walk about the upper house in the finest raiment. And I could let them, when they were eighteen and you sixteen, go to a ball.

If you have read so far, and I pray you have, and not thrown my letter in your winter fire, you will now perhaps await, scornfully, bitterly, my excuse for keeping you from that ball of state where, it was said, the roving eye of the glamorous prince might light on any girl, so ostentatiously egalitarian is your kingdom.

To be plain, at first I thought that here might be the answer. I had mused on plans to get you from your father's hands, but there was no one I might rely on, or so it seemed to me, who might assist you. But now, here was this. For you were yet so beautiful, and I could allow you to become more beautiful, if away from the sight of your father. And I had heard of this prince, I had once met him, and he was young and straight, handsome, a warrior and a scholar, a paragon. How could he fail to notice you? How could you fail to respond to him? And so you would escape that dire house where you had been made a slattern rather than an unpaid and incestuous whore.

Yet I had to meddle, had to be certain.

And so I turned again to my clever groom.

Yes, in reply to your question, perhaps your accusation, I paid him with my body. That grimy, cranky little man, always to the windward of the law. And do you know, my Princess, this villain was gentle. He had no imagination as a lover, but also he wished to play no games. He took his pleasure politely, and after it said that he had been proud to have access to my flesh. But also he confessed he loved truly a woman of the slums. I had seen her. She is ten years his senior, with fallen breasts, but when she beholds him, her face lights like the face of a girl. He said he would marry her if ever he had money enough. He had never asked me for a single coin, and refused the little I could offer him.

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He, then, made investigation of the paragon, and soon enough I was brought word. The prince was another of a kind. Well, do I need to tell you now? You have, so the servant girl has whispered to me, the marks of his whip engraved upon your back, and where they cut the ring from your finger, after he had broken the bone, there is now another ring of white.

Could I have warned you of it? Only as I had tried to do in the matter of your father.

Instead, I kept you close. I locked you in. You were a slut in the kitchen. How could you go to the ball of the prince who was a beast?

You found a way. I had mislaid, thinking of your loveliness and your vulnerability, that you were intelligent, and, like me, devious after your own fashion.

You wrote to your godmother, that icy ambitious woman, and when she consented to interview you, you found a means to reach her. She saw at once, with her gimlet gaze, your potential under my disguise. So then she had you washed and garnished, and put on you a gown made in a single day by those seamstresses who work until they go blind. It was a sorcerous gown, pure white, and threaded with silver. How many lost the last of their eyesight over it? It was meant to dazzle only one.

She took you to the ball in her own carriage. She introduced you as a relative from a far country. Did she say that, when you were settled, she expected a gift? Perhaps she was more subtle. And anyway, you were grateful, were you not, for he saw you, the beauteous royal young man, and he danced with you. Did his warm possessive hands remind you of the loving touches of your father? And when you kissed, hidden in the vines upon the balcony, were his lips a little parted?

She was very wise, your godmother, whisking you away so decorously on the stroke of midnight. It is said you left him a token, a small glass brooch shaped like a dancing slipper. I imagine that was also her idea. The shoe of a woman is the symbol of her sexual part. That into which one may slip and be a perfect fit.

The rest is well known about the kingdom. That he sought you, claimed you. That he wedded you.

And after that did you hear — I expect they kept it, protectively, from you — that your mad father grew more mad? That he went to the king's court and shouted there that you were a minx and a harlot, and the prince

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a lecher. Those loyal to the kingly house pursued your father. No one knows who. It was in an alleyway. They cut his throat. And I, of course, was disgraced, because I had ill-treated you. They sent us away, I and my daughters, into exile, beyond the border. But they let me keep a share of widow's money, which was to me a fortune, and we have done very well. It may amuse you to know — or anger you — or gladden you, how can I tell — that both my daughters have married. Their husbands are good men, and very rich. It happened in strange fateful ways. I will not tax you with it, in case I should offend. But, one of these husbands is even handsome, and both value laughter and sweetness. My daughters have blossomed in their care. They do not look ugly anymore, I can even see in them — my younger self. Or, sometimes, you.

So as our path went upwards, lovely girl, sad, lost girl, yours declined. When did he begin to hurt you first? The female servant who has helped me says that it was on your wedding night. She says he chained you in a spiked collar like a dog, and used his boots. And worse. Much worse. Does she lie? How I hope so. Maybe they are even lies about the scars upon you. Though once I came back, yes, hidden in my own disguise, and I watched on the street as you passed in the glass carriage. And you were like a bird in a cage. Your hair so pale a black — is there white in your hair? Your eyes that looked about, seeing nothing. Just a glimpse, then gone, like a spring flower, the snow-drop, that is swallowed by the mud.

Listen to me.

Tonight the clever dirty groom will be at your door, the hidden door your husband uses, but not now, for he is away hunting, is he not, riding down other slender things with his whip and that sack of poison in him called by some his heart. Yes, the groom will be there, and he will have a cloak for you, and papers. And if you go down with him, he will guard you like a child. He knows how, for he too has a daughter now, by his wife that he loves, in their fine house that I have been able to buy for them. You should witness him with this girl child. I think in him, for the very first, I have seen the proper, golden, everyday love of a *father*. Trust this man, if you will trust me. If ever again you can trust anyone. The border is near, and it is lightly snowing now. By dawn, when you can be far away, the snow will be thick as a wall between you and your hell.

I have bought a house for you, also. It is in a valley. A fountain falls from a cliff, and there are pines that smell of balm. In the summer there

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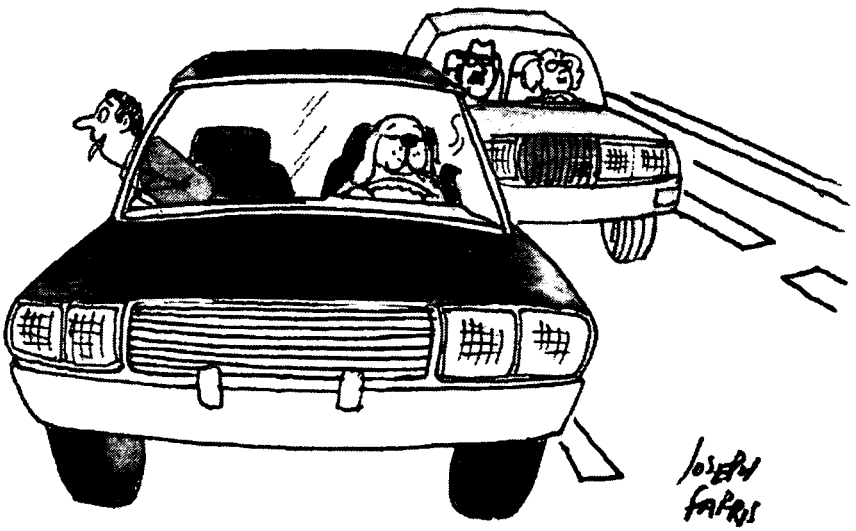
was never anywhere a sky so blue. And in winter, the sun is like silver. Even if you never live in it, this place is yours.

You need never see me, never look at me. Of course, of course, I love you. I always have. It is the selfish love that finds in another its own self. But I ask nothing of you, only that you will let me set you free. That you will let me set free the one I might have been, the one I was, the one you are.

There is everything I can say. I will put down my pen. The groom takes this to the girl, the girl gives this to you. And now, through the hours of the silent night, I will wait, wondering if you are on the road, flying at midnight, leaving not only a provocative shoe of glass, but all the false and empty dreams behind you, the dreams which became nightmares. Or, since I hid you in cold cinders, have you thrown my letter in your burning fire? ☙



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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE GENRE

I DON'T consider either science fiction or fantasy to be juvenile pursuits. But the American movie industry certainly does. Try to find even an approximation of an intelligent science fiction film pitched toward adult sensibilities and intelligence these days. It's an event almost as unusual as the Pentagon admitting to a close encounter with a Venusian visitor.

One of the reasons Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* did so well last winter, despite a generally lukewarm critical response, was that the film had more going for it than just two of Hollywood's hottest leading men. There was actually a vision present (even if it isn't as vibrant as it was in *Brazil*). And the screenplay by David and Janet Peoples — "inspired by" Chris Marker's haunting early 60s experimental short, *Le Jetée* — actually had a touch of complexity to it.

Alas, most of what currently passes for science fiction or fantasy film isn't worth discussing for five minutes. (Unless you want to converse about the latest special effects techniques.) The thematic spectrum of today's sf/f movies seems to be shrinking. And the age demographics appear to be falling even below that popular 80s target group of males aged 18 to 25. Looks to me like most of today's speculative flicks are being pitched to lads 5 to 15 years of age.

Just look at the source material Hollywood is drawing upon. Not adult-reader sf novels. No, most movies labeled science fiction or fantasy are based on kill-happy comic books or kiddie classics.

Comics are currently the hottest properties in Hollywood. The success of the Batman franchise, even after a switch in directors and leading men, tells the tale. Boffo worldwide box-office (we're talking about grosses of over a billion) with almost unlimited merchandising possibilities, what studio wouldn't want a piece of that action? Contemporary comic heroes

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with little appeal to either the mature or the very young (e.g., *The Crow*) can still find a sizeable audience wishing to vicariously experience repeated violent episodes in the driving rain, with even more driving rock soundtrack in the background.

But a multi-generational audience means the biggest possible success. That's why Dark Horse softened the violence and brightened the mood of *The Mask* a bit before bringing it to the screen. The payoff was attracting all the wee tykes and parents as well as the adolescent crowd.

The potential is huge. And that's why scads of superheroes (and so-called "anti-superheroes") are flying high in movieland. There are currently over two dozen comic book projects in the Hollywood pipeline. Everything from Wonder Woman to Men in Black to Concrete will be comin' atcha soon. Sound like overkill? Hollywood doesn't know the meaning of the word. And part of me understands the undeniable appeal of all these pulp projects. Comic book heroes are, after all, the ultimate in high concept packages. Costuming and props can (and do) substitute for character development. And who needs a plot when you fill the screen with zap-powee action?

Well, actually, I do. I may just be shockingly out of sync with my times, but I still want to see a movie that is capable of provoking a thought and not just a visceral response in the viewer. A good science fiction film demands at least that much of its story. And that's why I have trouble accepting comix flix as Science Fiction Films.

Can you blame me?

If you can, you probably didn't see — lucky you — the latest Dark Horse Entertainment Production, *Barb Wire*, starring *Playboy* cover-queen and babelicious *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson Lee.

Yes, this is science fiction, in that it is set in a year we haven't yet reached — 2017 to be exact. The USA, we are told, has been torn apart by civil war. And our population has been decimated by warfare and government-issue disease. The one bright spot (in its own grubby, decayed, riotous way) on our devastated national landscape is Steel Harbor, the last of the free cities. That's where a woman calling herself Barb Wire (Lee) runs the hottest nightclub in town, a place called the Hammerhead Bar and Grille.

Although the place is packed with partiers every night, Barb inexplicably has trouble making the payroll for her small staff. This causes her to double as a bounty hunter. Her secondary occupation

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is necessary, of course, to allow her more excuses for roaring around on a motorcycle, shooting up people and places. And this also gives the writers (Chuck Pfarrer and Ilene Chaiken) and the director (rock video veteran David Hogan, taking over from a fired Adam Rifkin) a chance to justify — in their own minds — having their hard-bitten heroine assume certain "cover" identities — like exotic dancer and prostitute — that would best exploit Ms. Lee's bionic blonde attributes.

As for a plot, what there is of one isn't exactly futuristic. It's as old as the hills. Or, at least as old as 1942. *Barb Wire* is nothing more than a heavy-metal rip-off of *Casablanca*. Here's a list of a few of the substitutions: pouting Pamela role-reverses Humphrey Bogart's Rick; the muscular Maori actor, Temeura Morrison (so brilliant in last year's *Once Were Warriors*, and so wasted here) performs an underwritten rendition of the Ingrid Bergman lost-love role; soap star Victoria Rowell, playing a resistance leader/doctor hoping to escape to Canada with crucial medical information, (just stands around as she) stands in for Paul Henreid; the worried sidekick role, formerly a black lounge singer (Dooley Wilson) is now filled by a German waiter (played by Udo Kier); and a pair of special contact lenses fill in for the elusive letters-of-transit in the old classic.

And the evil Nazi villains have been transformed into...evil Nazi villains (here called Congressionals). I don't know why it is, but the folks who make this kind of dystopic sf movie can't seem to help but fall into the most obvious clichés. That the bad guy in *Barb Wire* (played by Steve Railsback) looks and acts just like a Hollywood-version SS officer is an early indicator that this film will be chockfull of stock characters. Perhaps the costume department saves money this way. (After all, the film had only a $20 million budget — and there were a lot of explosions to pay for.) Wardrobe designers probably just raided the old lots for uniforms left over from WWII movies, and then picked up the rest of the costumes at a Hells Angels flea market.

There's nothing inherently wicked about using visual cues like clothing to short-cut exposition. It is an indisputable necessity when you're trying to tell a two-dimensional story in a few pages of color panels. But *a movie is not a comic book*. And if you're going to keep an audience happy and interested for two hours, you'd better have something fresh to say. Or, at the very

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least, play your riff on a familiar tune with the kind of creative energy that makes it seem brand new.

The Mask, with its quick pace, musical numbers, eye-boggling computer animation, and the memorable manic performance by Jim Carrey in the hero's role, worked. It was genuinely fun to watch. But *Barb Wire* provides no such enjoyment. It has the requisite firepower, but no creative spark. The film's star can't escape much of the blame. Ms. Lee is no actor. Her talents lie, entirely, in the way she looks in a low-cut leather bodysuit and stiletto boots. (And I'll grant her this: She is a plastic Playmate extraordinaire.) What you see is what you get with Pamela. Which would be fine in a comic book or a *Playboy* magazine. But a feature film requires more of an actor's performance than being willing to take a bubble bath in a see-through tub.

Trainers could teach Lee to kick-box. (Although, in the cinched-waist outfits and five-inch heels she had to wear, I still wonder how she did it.) And firearms consultants could teach her how to handle a gun. But, regrettably, no one was able to elicit any real emotional response from her. That was the director's job, of course. But Mr. Hogan, in his feature debut as a helmer, just wasn't up to the task.

And he probably thought no one would notice how flat Ms. Lee's dialogue delivery was. We were supposed to be too fixated upon areas of Ms. Lee that are decidedly un-flat. To make sure of this, Hogan opens his film with a scene of his Barb(ie) Wire doing her own wet and wild little flashdance. (She's undercover at a stripjoint. Natch.) And he and his writers later have male characters repeatedly make references to her "buoyant" physique.

It's not so much offensive as silly and boring. Just like the repeated conceit of having Barb violently overreact anytime a man calls her "Babe." That's what substitutes for humor in this film. A real sense of self-parodying fun might have saved this movie. (Heck, *Barbarella* was better than this!) But this movie can't even adequately exploit the possibilities of its *Casablanca* pastiche. It's too busy exploiting the body of its star. That's not a movie. That's not even a comic book. That's a girly magazine — and one that's a tease, at that.

Barb Wire will probably still appeal to many 13-year old boys — worldwide. But I am female, and significantly older than 13. And I find myself losing patience with movies like *Barb Wire*, and, instead, becoming increasingly attracted to

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films with an even younger target demographic: small children. Looking back over the last year, I realize that my favorite sf/f movies were those pitched to kids and families. *Babe* was a delight. And *Toy Story* was an animated wonder. *The Secret of Roan Inish* is a film I consider a special treasure. And I genuinely enjoyed *The Indian in the Cupboard*. Even films like *Jumanji* and *Casper*, which were not as good as they might have been, were still a heck of a lot more pleasant to watch than *Johnny Mnemonic*.

I fear that I may be regressing to childhood, moviewise. Well, so be it. Let me, then, recommend to you another kiddie flick well worth the price of admission: *James and the Giant Peach*.

Although I didn't find Henry Selick's second feature quite up to the standard of his first, *Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas*, I still consider it one of the best fantasy films (so far) this year. Based on Roald Dahl's 1961 best-selling children's book, it tells the story of a young orphan boy (Paul Terry) who escapes an unhappy life of abuse and servitude to two vile aunts (Miriam Margolyes and *Ab Fab*'s Joanna Lumley). But young James doesn't simply hit the road with a knapsack on his back. He rolls, floats and flies away aboard a giant peach, accompanied by a crew of out-sized insects.

Director Selick tells much of his story through the stop-motion animation he is known for. But *James* is actually a captivating grab-bag of cinematic techniques. The film opens and closes with live-action scenes touched with animation. Then, when James enters the fantastical fruit, the stop-action takes over. There he meets his new loving family: a Garboesque but tender Spider (voiced by Susan Sarandon), a pugnacious Centipede (Richard Dreyfuss), a cultivated Grasshopper (Simon Callow), a worried Earthworm (David Thewlis), a motherly Ladybug (Jane Leeves) and an illuminating Glowworm (Miriam Margolyes).

Because much of the story takes place in the air and on the sea (backdrops that defy traditional animation methods), computer-generated imagery (CGI) and other high-tech procedures supplement the traditional drawn effects that set the scene for James and his pals. My personal favorite scene, a nightmare sequence, uses yet another technique, cut-out (collage) animation.

It all works together beautifully. Well, more or less. I must admit that I was severely disappointed when James was transformed from boy into puppet when

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he entered the peach. I think that the enchantment of his new world would have been much more striking had the story's young hero remained a live-action character (that is, a real boy) throughout the film. I have read that Henry Selick wanted to do just that, updating the wondrous techniques of mid-century wizard Ray Harryhausen. But Disney, who held the pursestrings, didn't want to front the costs involved. Likewise, they (and the Dahl family) didn't like Selick's choice of screenwriter, the late Dennis Potter (best known for *The Singing Detective*). Nor were they enthused with Selick's choice in composers. He wanted Elvis Costello. They wanted, and got, Disney veteran Randy Newman.

Disney pushed for something they could identify as a traditional Disney product. Selick and his brilliant animation and design crew wanted to push out into new animation territory. For the most part, Disney won these little battles. And that makes me sad. *James and the Giant Peach* (like *Toy Story*) was made *for* Disney but not *by* the Disney machine. And that is why both films are much more inventive than any of the sappy "animated classics" Uncle Walt's artists have turned out, like clockwork, in the last twenty years.

Those Disney cartoon features we all grew up on have always followed a strict recipe. And they have always been fashioned for consistency of sweetness. Well, cookie-cutters make delightfully uniform treats, but I'd much rather sample the kind of surprising concoction Henry Selick could come up with, left to his own devices. I bet it would be even more delicious. A little strange, perhaps. But intelligent. And challenging. And maybe even halfway adult in its sensibilities.

Imagine that! Something fantastical AND grown-up being produced in Hollywood. It could happen. Henry Selick has moved his affiliation from Disney proper to the "independent" and more open-minded Disney affiliate, Miramax. I can hardly wait to see what he comes up with next.

In the meantime, though, given the choice between watching a science fiction/fantasy film that's decidedly juvenile, and one that targets the wee ones, I'll take the kiddie fare almost every time. With less violence and more storyline, "family films" like *James and the Giant Peach* can even help us to cope with this real and present world, by reminding us to honor the magical realm inside our own head and heart.

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Pat Murphy has won two Nebulas, one for short fiction and the other for her novel The Falling Woman. *She has also won* Asimov's *Readers' Award, the Theodore Sturgeon award, the Philip K. Dick award, and the World Fantasy award.*

When Pat finished her fourth novel, Nadya: The Wolf Chronicles *(to be published by Tor), she returned to short stories. "Iris versus the Black Knight" is one of the first stories she wrote, based on a battle sequence she has had in mind for a long, long time.*

Iris Versus the Black Knight

By Pat Murphy

WHEN IRIS OPENED HER eyes that morning, the world was gray. She blinked at her bedspread: dove-gray chenille. The walls of her room were covered with pale gray wallpaper patterned with black roses. The night before, she remembered, the bedspread had been pink, the roses on the wallpaper had been red.

"Iris!" her mother called from the kitchen. "Get out of bed!"

Iris scrambled from bed, staring wildly around her room. Her clothes were gray; her toys were gray; the carpet beneath her feet was gray. Outside her window, the grass was the color of ashes and the sky was filled with clouds. No color anywhere.

"Hurry, Iris." Iris's mother bustled into the room. She was already dressed for work in a neat black suit with black shoes. "You'll be late for school if you don't get dressed right now. Here you go." She snatched a dress from the closet and tossed it onto the bed. "Now get dressed. No excuses now."

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"But Mom," Iris said in a small voice, "the colors...."

Too late. Her mother was already halfway down the hall to the kitchen. Not that it mattered much. Her mother never had time to listen.

Iris took off her pajamas and pulled the dress over her head. Last night, the dress had been blue. It had been her favorite dress: a beautiful sky blue with dark blue trim. Now it was the color of storm clouds and the trim was black.

Before her mother could return, Iris hurried to her school desk, where she had been coloring the night before. The picture she had colored so carefully in brilliant blues and reds and yellows had faded to gray and black.

She shook her head, bewildered. The crayons that lay scattered on the desk were all shades of gray and white and black: charcoal, granite, ash gray, pearl, dirty snow. She picked up a crayon that had all the paper peeled away. That crayon had been red the night before. When she had worn it down to the paper she had peeled away the wrapping so that she could keep coloring. It had been red, she was sure of that. Her heart pounded as she picked up the crayon and scribbled on a scrap of paper. The line she drew was black.

"No dawdling," her mother said, swooping into the room. "It's breakfast time, young lady."

"But my picture...." Iris protested. Before she could say more, her mother had rolled the picture and snapped a rubber band around it. She tugged a brush through Iris's unruly hair, complaining about the tangles and the curls. Then she escorted Iris to the breakfast table.

Iris was still holding her crayon, clutching it so hard her hand ached. "But Mom..."

"Eat your breakfast," her mother said.

Knowing that her mother was not in a mood to listen to anything, Iris slipped the crayon into the pocket of her dress. She ate gray cornflakes. Her mother took her to the bus stop on the corner. A granite-colored school bus took her to school.

The bus was crowded and noisy. Iris sat quietly, surrounded by fifth graders who ignored her completely. She looked out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of a color, any color. The stop signs were black and

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white; the traffic light flashed steel-gray, dove gray, and black. No colors anywhere. But no one else seemed to notice anything was wrong.

The bell rang just after they got to the school, and Iris hurried to class and sat at her desk. The class said good morning to Mrs. Dixon, their teacher, and saluted the flag (black, white, and gray).

For the past month, the class had been studying the ancient Greeks. They had spent the previous week building a somewhat angular model of the Parthenon from sugar cubes. That morning, each student had to stand in front of the class and do a report about a Greek god or goddess.

Iris had worked hard on her report. She had wanted to find just the right goddess to talk about. She had spent long hours searching the shelves of the library until, in the grownup section where third-graders were not supposed to venture, she found a battered book that had what she was looking for.

When her turn came, she said: "My report is on Iris, the goddess of the rainbow." She held up the portrait of the goddess that she had painstakingly executed in crayon. Yesterday, the robes that billowed around the goddess had been brilliant blue; today, they were shades of gray. The goddess's flowing golden hair was now grizzled; the rainbow on which she stood was striped with gray and black.

"Iris was the messenger of the gods," Iris said. "When some god wanted to send a message to Earth, they'd send Iris and she would follow the rainbow down to the ground. She had blue robes and golden hair. One time, Hera sent her down to the Underworld...."

"Iris!" the teacher interrupted sternly, "I think you should stop there. You're talking nonsense. What's that word you used: 'rainbow'? There's no such word. And that funny sound — 'bloo.' What's that supposed to mean?"

Iris looked at Mrs. Dixon, startled. In a room of gray things, her teacher was the grayest. Her hair was the color of cement; her dress matched the playground blacktop — it seemed to soak up all light, leaving her standing in a gray haze.

"I think it's clear that you've just decided to make up stories," the teacher said. "I don't remember a Greek goddess named Iris."

"I...I found her in a book," Iris stammered. She was ready to describe the dusty dog-eared volume that had pictured the goddess running down the rainbow. "She was Hera's messenger and sister to the Harpies. She...."

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"I think it's time for you to sit down, Iris," the teacher said in her stone gray voice.

Iris sat down, stunned and silent. There was no arguing with that voice, even when you knew that you were telling the truth and you could find the book in the library. Then Cynthia, a sweet-faced girl whose hands were always very clean, presented a report on Athena, the goddess of wisdom whose symbol was the owl.

Iris sat at her desk, staring at her picture of the goddess Iris and wishing that the Harpies would come and rip Mrs. Dixon's entrails out. Or maybe Perseus, carrying the head of the Medusa in his bag. He'd whip out the head and turn Mrs. Dixon to stone on the spot. That would serve her right. Iris sat quietly at her desk, thinking bitter thoughts and waiting for recess.

At recess, Iris pushed her way out with the other kids, staying in a crowd so that Mrs. Dixon couldn't call her over and make her stop. "Hey, Goddess Iris, watch where you're going," said Cynthia when Iris pushed past.

Iris caught a glimpse of her own face in the mirror in the hall — she was frowning and she looked like she might cry. On the playground at last, she fled to the far edge of the blacktop, out past the fifth graders' game of dodge ball.

She stood on the edge of the field that adjoined the blacktop. In sunny weather, the students sometimes played in the grass. But the last few days of rain had left the field muddy and slippery. Enormous gray and white sea gulls stood in the grass, watching Iris with their bright beady eyes.

"There is a goddess named Iris," she muttered to herself. "There is a rainbow. I don't care what they say."

The largest of the gulls squawked and bobbed his head, as if in response. Iris stared at him and the gull stared back.

"I remember colors, even if no one else does." She glanced up at the cloudy sky. "It's blue up there," she told the gull. "At least it used to be. I bet it still is. If only I could get there."

The gull squawked again and flapped his wings. As Iris watched, he took two steps forward and pecked at something coiled in the grass. A snake? The gull came up with something in his beak. The end of a jump rope, lost in the grass. The gull waddled forward, pulling the rope behind

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him. It was a long rope. One end was frayed so that the single strand had separated into smaller strands.

When the rope was stretched straight behind the gull, he put that end down and waddled over to the frayed end. Then he screeched, looking around at the other gulls. The other birds stopped their preening and walked over to join him. There were dozens of them. When the leader screeched again, the gulls took off with a thunder of wings and a chorus of squawks and screeches. Each one clutched a strand of the rope in its claws.

Iris stared in amazement as the rope rose from the ground. At the last possible moment, she snatched at the end of the rope, wrapping it around her hand just before the gulls pulled it out of reach. She clung for a moment while the gulls tugged. She felt light on her feet, as if she were barely touching the blacktop. Above her, the gulls strained.

For a moment she was frightened. What was happening? Then she looked up at the gray sky, remembered that it had once been blue. Thinking of blue, she kicked off her black loafers and jumped in the air.

Slowly, majestically, the gulls rose, with Iris dangling beneath them. The breeze caught her skirt and the fabric billowed. She swayed beneath the flock of gulls like the clapper of a giant bell.

"Goodbye," she called down to the girls playing tetherball, the boys on the jungle gym. Cynthia stood by the monkeybars, waiting her turn. She stared up at Iris, her mouth open. "Goodbye!" Iris called. "Goodbye!"

The gulls carried her over the playground toward Mrs. Dixon, who was standing by the school door. She shouted up as Iris passed overhead. "Where are you going, Iris Johnson? You get right back down here. The bell is just about to ring and...."

"I'm off to find the rainbow," Iris called. Then the school bell rang, drowning out Mrs. Dixon's reply. And the gulls carried Iris higher, leaving the school behind.

Far below her, cars rushed to and fro in the city streets. She saw a driver staring up at her, then heard brakes screeching. Traffic came to a standstill as drivers stopped their cars to stare up at Iris.

She clung to the rope with both hands now. She felt dizzy from looking down at the cars, and she kept thinking about what would happen if the rope slipped from her hands. She closed her eyes so that she couldn't see how far she would fall.

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Still the gulls carried her upward. The honking of horns and the clangor of the school bell faded with distance. It was silent, except for the rustling of the gulls' wings as they flapped. Her hands ached and she was alone, all alone.

Puffs of gray fog swirled around Iris, and she felt its chilly dampness on her hands and her face. When she opened her eyes, she could see nothing but fog below her, above her, all around her. She clutched the rope tighter as the grayness pressed against her face.

She kept rising, and she saw something above her, a darker shade within the pale gray fog. More clouds, she thought, but as she rose toward it she realized that this wasn't clouds, but something more solid. Gray walls, meeting at tidy right angles with a gray floor.

The gulls carried her closer and she could see a rectangular opening in one wall, a doorway into a courtyard of neat gray flagstone squares. As she swayed beneath the flock of gulls, she came right up to the doorway, and then swung away again. Up close, and then away. With each swing, she got a glimpse through the opening into the courtyard. At each corner of the courtyard was a turreted tower. From the top of each tower, a black banner flew. A castle in the clouds, supported by nothing but fog.

On the third swing, she let go of the rope with one aching hand and grabbed the edge of the doorway. The stone was cold against her hand — so cold it felt like it was burning her. Enduring the pain, she pulled herself through the doorway into the courtyard. The rope slipped from her grasp. She fell and landed with a bump on the gray floor of the courtyard.

Above her, the flock of gulls wheeled and flew away, heading back to the school yard. All except the largest gull, the one she thought of as the leader. He landed on a turret, flapped his wings, and settled down to watch her.

She rubbed her arms and shivered. She was very cold. Her skin was clammy from the fog; her clothes were damp. She did not know what she was doing here. Her teacher would scold her for flying away with a flock of gulls, for being late to class. Her mother would yell at her for getting her clothes wet. She was trembling — from cold or from fear or from some of each — she couldn't tell.

Standing in the courtyard, she turned in a circle, looking at the walls that surrounded her. The fog was filling in the doorway through which she

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had entered. As she watched, the fog solidified, becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the wall. She stood in the center of the courtyard, hemmed in by gray walls. So tidy and square.

"What are you doing here?" asked a voice that was as flat and as gray as the stones.

She whirled around, looking for the source of the voice. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice small and breathless.

"What are you doing here?" the voice asked again. It was hard and mechanical and cold, the color of steel.

"I'm looking for the colors," she said. "I wanted to...."

"There are no colors," the voice said. "There never were any colors."

She was afraid. Her breath caught in her throat. She felt small, very small. "But I remember colors," she began. "The sky was blue, the grass was green, the flowers...."

"You don't know anything," the voice said. "You're just a stupid little girl. The sky is gray, the grass is gray, the flowers are gray. They have always been gray. Be quiet and go home."

She wasn't smart. She knew she wasn't smart. Her teacher told her that; her mother told her that. The voice sounded like it knew what it was talking about, so stern and confident. She knew she shouldn't argue. The voice was level now, but she could sense a hidden anger that might erupt if she disagreed again. Maybe she was wrong. There were no colors. She should just go home and draw pictures with her gray crayons. Maybe gray was not so bad.

Then the seagull that perched on the turret shrieked and she looked at him. Yesterday, his beak had been bright yellow with a red spot near the tip.

"No," she said, her voice still small. "That's not true. There used to be colors."

"Never," the voice said.

"Yes, there were colors." Her voice was louder now, and shrill. "We made red hearts on Valentines Day. And green shamrocks on St. Patrick's Day. And on Halloween, I drew pictures in orange and black."

"Black," said the voice, deeper now. The voice came from behind her and she turned to face it. "There is black. Only black."

The fog had gathered behind her in a dark cloud that formed an enormous figure. The fog swirled and the figure grew more solid and

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distinct: a man in glistening black armor. He wore a black plume in his helmet, carried a black sword at his side. "There is no rainbow," said the black knight. "No colors." He stepped toward her, his sword held high. "Go home, little girl." He took a long slow swing at her with his sword.

She stumbled backwards, tripping over her own feet in her haste to dodge the blow. She was shaking; she was cold and afraid. He was right; she should just go home — if only she could find the way.

"Go home and learn to be a good girl," the black knight said. "Learn to draw in black and white. That's the way the world is. Go home."

She stumbled back again, barely evading the slowly swinging blade. What had made her think that she could find colors in a gray world? The knight lifted his sword to swing again.

She heard the thunder of wings and saw a flash of gray and white. The gull swooped under the swinging sword and snatched a dark stick from the gray floor. The bird circled the knight's head, then swooped again, placing the stick in Iris's hand as it passed.

Iris clutched a crayon. She recognized it as her own crayon. It must have fallen from her pocket when she stumbled.

"There is only black," the knight said. "There is no rainbow."

"That's not true," Iris said. She held the crayon and remembered red — the color of fire and of roses. She lifted her crayon like a sword, brandishing it between her and the knight. As she held it, the crayon grew, stretching until it was as long as the knight's sword. Not just a crayon now, but a crayon sword, gleaming in the gray light.

Inexpertly, she flailed at the knight with the sword that had once been a crayon. Surprisingly he gave ground, using his sword only to block her blows. "You're a stupid little girl. You'll be hurt if you're not careful." His voice sounded less confident than before. "You'll be hurt."

"Give me back the colors," Iris shouted, striking at him with the crayon. She was still scared, but she was angry too.

"There are no colors," the knight insisted. "The world is gray."

He was backing away from her, blocking her clumsy blows. He could have struck her — she left enough openings — but he just kept blocking until she had backed him into a corner.

She was furious now, her face hot, her heart pounding. Her mother would have said she was in a state and sent her to her room. But her mother

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was far away and Iris's anger knew no bounds. Red anger, she thought. Hot as fire, passionate as roses.

"You can't do this," the knight said, his voice weaker now. "You're just a little girl."

Iris screamed, an inarticulate cry of rage and passion, and lifted her sword. The knight lifted his sword to block the blow just as Iris sprang forward. His sword caught her on the arm, and she felt a sudden sharp pain.

She stumbled back, clutching at the wound. The sword dropped from her hand. Blood flowed from her arm, red blood seeping through her fingers as she pressed her hand to the wound.

Red blood.

The knight still had his back to the wall, and he had lifted his hand to shield his eyes from the brilliant red. A drop of blood fell onto the sword that lay at her feet, and the weapon was no longer black; it gleamed red as a ruby. She lifted her eyes. Two of the banners that flew from the castle's turrets were still black, but the third had a streak of red and the fourth was a brilliant crimson, glowing like a flame against the dull gray sky.

"No," moaned the knight.

"Yes," whispered Iris. Her arm hurt with a sharp fierce pain. Blood dripped from the wound, making glorious bright splashes on the grayness at her feet. She felt weak and sick to her stomach. But the knight leaned against the wall, as far from her as he could get, his head turned away as if he could not look at her.

Swaying, she took a step toward him. "Red," she murmured, and then her legs gave way beneath her and she sat down suddenly.

Her eyes were filled with tears. She wept because her arm ached and she wept because it was so wonderful to see the red banner against the gray sky.

Her tears fell on her dress, and where they fell the fabric changed from dull gray to bright blue, the color of the sky on a sunny day. The color spread; her dress was blue again. When she looked up, one of the gray banners had become a beautiful blue. The banner that had been striped with red had a blue stripe as well.

The knight moaned. He had fallen too. He sat with his back against the courtyard wall, and he looked smaller than he had before. Or maybe

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she had grown bigger. As she stared at him, it seemed to her that she knew him from somewhere.

"Who are you?" she asked the knight. "I think I know you, but I can't remember. I don't know...."

"You don't know who I am?" The knight's voice was barely a whisper, but it grew stronger as he spoke. "And you don't know who you are. I'll tell you who you are. You are a stupid little girl. You are...."

Iris frowned at him, then looked up at the banners that flew overhead. The fog was swirling, growing paler and thinner. She caught a glimpse of blue sky between the tatters of fog. The colors were returning. He had taken the colors, and she had brought them back.

She smiled — though her arm ached and she shivered in the cold and her stomach hurt and her face was wet with tears. "I'm Iris," she said in a tone of surprise. "I'm the goddess of the rainbow."

The sun broke through the clouds and filled the courtyard with golden light. Where the light touched her, it warmed her, soothed her pains. Sunlight washed the last black banner with gold and added a golden stripe to the rainbow banner.

She was Iris, a messenger of the gods who had followed the rainbow down to earth and lost her way. She was the goddess of color and the protector of beauty. She was a little girl in a blue dress, sitting in a courtyard made of clouds, clutching her wounded arm.

She recognized the black knight now. He was the god of the Underworld, a place of darkness, a colorless place inhabited by the souls of the people who had died without hope. She had been carrying a message to him when she lost her way.

"You are just a weak little girl," he was whispering. "You have no power, you..."

"Give it up," Iris said, grinning at him. "You've lost. I brought the rainbow back."

"You've won this battle," the knight whispered. "But I'll be back." The sunlight did not touch the courtyard around him; he lay in a puddle of shadow. His shape was blurring, his outline becoming less distinct. But he continued to whisper as his body swirled and flowed. "Darkness always wins in the end," he whispered. "Remember that, Iris."

"I think it's time you went back where you belonged," Iris said

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impatiently. At a wave of her hand, the courtyard began to blur around him, dissipating like fog on a sunny day. The floor thinned, then broke beneath the knight. As the floor gave way, he changed — his arms stretched and broadened, his body shrank. A black buzzard swooped away on outstretched wings, gliding downward toward the earth.

Iris watched him fly away. He would be back to fight again, and that was all right. That was the way things were, the battle went on forever. Light against darkness; joy against sorrow. But this time she had won.

Iris heard a screeching cry overhead. The seagull circled her once, then flew upward. He plucked the rainbow banner from the pole with his beak and flew down to drop it at her feet.

She stood then, shaking out her sky blue dress. She still looked like the little girl who had flown off with the seagulls and she rather liked that. In a while, perhaps, she would return to her proper form, but not just now. She wrapped the banner around her wounded arm, a gaily colored bandage that fluttered in the breeze.

She looked at the rainbow path beneath her feet. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. In one direction, the rainbow curved upward — toward Olympus, the home of the gods. She could go home now.

Then she looked downward, where the rainbow led toward the Earth. Far, far below, she could see the school building. Though the sky was blue and the fields around it were green, the school itself remained stubbornly gray. But that could be changed. She smiled grimly, remembering Mrs. Dixon and her certainty that there was no goddess named Iris.

"Come on," she called to the gull as she started down the rainbow path to Earth. She could return to Olympus later. Right now, she had unfinished business below. Mrs. Dixon would be so surprised.

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Ray Bradbury's short fiction has inspired generation after generation of writers. He has published a lot of short stories in the last few years, a number of them in F&SF. *This fall, Avon will publish a collection of these and other short stories titled* Quicker than the Eye.

We offer to you "The Finnegan," both as a teaser to get you to buy the collection, and because it is one of Bradbury's best.

The Finnegan

By Ray Bradbury

TO SAY THAT I HAVE BEEN haunted for the rest of my life by the affair Finnegan, is to grossly understate the events leading up to that final melancholy. Only now at three score and ten can I write these words for an astonished constabulary who may well run with picks and shovels to unearth my truths or bury my lies.

The facts are these:

Three children went astray and were missed. Their bodies were found in the midst of Chatham Forest and each bore no marks of criminal assassination, but all had suffered their life blood to be drained. Only their skin remained like that of some discolored vineyard grapes withered by sunlight and no rain.

From the withered detritus of these innocents rose fresh rumors of vampires or similar beasts with similar appetites. Such myths always pursue the facts to stun them in their tracks. It could only have been a tombyard beast, it was said, that fed on and destroyed three lives and ruined three dozen more.

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The children were buried in the most holy ground. Soon after, Sir Robert Merriweather, pretender to the throne of Sherlock Holmes but modestly refusing the claim, moved through the ten dozen doors of his antique house to come forth to search for this terrible thief of life. With myself, I might add, to carry his brandy and bumbershoot and warn him of underbrush pitfalls in that dark and mysterious forest.

Sir Robert Merriweather? you say.

Just that. Plus the ten times ten plus twelve amazing doors in his shut-up house.

Were the doors used? Not one in nine. How had they appeared in Sir Robert's old manse? He had shipped them in, as a collector of doors, from Rio, Paris, Rome, Tokyo and mid-America. Once collected, he had stashed them, hinged, to be seen from both sides, on the walls of his upper and lower chambers. There he conducted tours of these odd portals for such antique fools as were ravished by the sight of the curiously overdone, the undersimplified, the rococo, or some First Empire cast aside by Napoleon's nephews, or seized from Hermann Goering who had in turn ransacked the Louvre. Others, pelted by Oklahoma dust storms, were jostled home in flatbeds cushioned by bright posters from carnivals buried in the wind-blown desolations of 1936 America. Name your least favorite door, it was his. Name the best quality, he owned it also, hidden and safe, true beauties behind oblivion's portals.

I had come to see his doors, not the deaths. At his behest, that were commands, I had bought my curiosity a steamship ticket and arrived to find Sir Robert involved not with ten dozen doors, but some great *dark* door. A mysterious portal, still un-found. And beneath? A tomb.

Sir Robert hurried the grand tour, opening and shutting panels rescued from Peking, long buried near Etna, or filched from Nantucket. But his heart, gone sick, was not in this what should have been delightful tour.

He described the spring rains that drenched the country to make things green, only to have people to walk out in that fine weather and one week find the body of a boy emptied of life through two incisions in his neck, and in the next weeks, the bodies of the two girls. People shouted for the police and sat drinking in pubs, their faces long and pale, while mothers locked their children home where fathers lectured on the dooms that lay in Chatham Forest.

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"Will you come with me," said Sir Robert at last, "on a very strange sad picnic?"

"I will," I said.

So we snapped ourselves in weather-proofs, lugged a hamper of sandwiches and red wine and plunged into the forest on a drear Sunday.

There was time as we moved down a hill into the dripping gloom of the trees, to recall what the papers had said about the vanished children's bloodless flesh, the police thrashing the forest ten dozen times, clueless, while the surrounding estates slammed their doors drum-tight at sunset.

"Rain. Damn. Rain!" Sir Robert's s pale face stared up, his gray mustache quivering over his thin mouth. He was sick and brittle and old. "Our picnic will be *ruined!*"

"Picnic?" I said. "Will our killer join us for eats?"

"I pray to God he will," Sir Robert said. "Yes, pray to God he will."

We walked through a land that was now mists, now dim sunlight, now forest, now open glade, until we came into a silent part of the woods, a silence made of the way the trees grew wetly together and the way the green moss lay, in swards and hillocks. Spring had not yet filled the empty trees. The sun was like an arctic disc, withdrawn, cold and almost dead.

'This is the place," said Sir Robert at last.

"Where the children were found?" I inquired.

"'Their bodies empty as empty can be."

I looked at the glade and thought of the children and the people who had stood over them with startled faces and the police who had come to whisper and touch and go away, lost.

"The murderer was never apprehended?"

"Not this clever fellow. How observant are you?" asked Sir Robert.

"What do you want observed?"

"There's the catch. The police slipped up. They were stupidly anthropomorphic about the whole bloody mess, seeking a killer with two arms, two legs, a suit of clothes and a knife. So hypnotized with their human concept of the killer that they overlooked one obvious unbelievable fact about this place. *So!*"

He gave his cane a quick light tap on the earth.

Something happened. I stared at the ground. "Do that again," I whispered.

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"You *saw* it?"

"I thought I saw a small trap door open and shut. May I have your cane?"

He gave me the cane. I tapped the ground.

It happened again.

"A spider!" I cried. "Gone! God, how quick!"

"Finnegan," Sir Robert muttered.

"What?"

"You know the old saying: in again, out again, Finnegan. Here."

With his pen-knife, Sir Robert dug in the soil to lift an entire clod of earth, breaking off bits to show me the tunnel. The spider, in panic, leaped out its small wafer door and fell to the ground.

Sir Robert handed me the tunnel. "Like gray velvet. Feel. A model builder that small chap. A tiny shelter, camouflaged, and him alert. He could hear a fly walk. Then pounce out, seize, pop back, *slam* the lid!"

"I didn't know you loved Nature."

"Loathe it. But this wee chap, there's much we share. Doors. Hinges. Wouldn't consider other arachnids. But my love of portals drew me to study this incredible carpenter." Sir Robert worked the trap on its cob-web hinges. "What craftsmanship! And it *all* ties to the tragedies!"

"The murdered children?"

Sir Robert nodded. "Notice any special thing about this forest?"

"It's too quiet."

"Quiet!" Sir Robert smiled weakly. "Vast *quantities* of silence. No familiar birds, beetles, crickets, toads. Not a rustle or stir. The police didn't notice. Why should they? But it was this absence of sound and motion in the glade that prompted my wild theory about the murders."

He toyed with the amazing structure in his hands.

"What would you say if you could imagine a spider *large* enough, in a hideout *big* enough, so that a running child might hear a vacuumed sound, be seized, and vanish with a soft thud below. How say you?" Sir Robert stared at the trees. "Poppycock and bilge? Yet, why *not?* Evolution, selection, growth, mutations, and — *pfft!*"

Again he tapped with his cane. A trap door flew open, shut.

"Finnegan," he said.

The sky darkened.

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"Rain!" Casting a cold gray eye at the clouds, he stretched his frail hand to touch the showers. "Damn! Arachnids *hate* rain. And so will our huge dark Finnegan."

"Finnegan!" I cried, irritably.

"I *believe* in him, yes."

"A spider larger than a *child!!*"

"*Twice* as large!"

The cold wind blew a mizzle of rain over us. "Lord, I hate to leave. Quick, before we go. *Here.*"

Sir Robert raked away the old leaves with his cane, revealing two globular gray-brown objects.

"What *are* they?" I bent. "Old cannonballs?"

"No." He cracked the grayish globes. "Soil, through and through."

I touched the crumbled bits.

"Our Finnegan excavates," said Sir Robert. "To make his tunnel. With his large rake-like chelicerae he dislodges soils, works it into a ball, carries it in his jaws and drops it beyond his hole."

Sir Robert displayed half a dozen pellets on his trembling palm. "Normal balls evicted from a tiny trap door tunnel. Toy size." He knocked his cane on the huge globes at our feet. "Explain *those!*"

I laughed. "The *children* must've made them with mud!"

"Nonsense!" cried Sir Robert irritably, glaring about at trees and earth. "By God, somewhere, our dark beast lurks beneath his velvet lid. We might be *standing* on it. Christ, don't stare! HIs door has beveled rims. Some architect, this Finnegan. A genius at camouflage."

Sir Robert raved on and on, describing the dark earth, the arachnid, its fiddling legs, its hungry mouth, as the wind roared and the trees shook.

Suddenly, Sir Robert flung up his cane.

"No!" he cried.

I had no time to turn. My flesh froze, my heart stopped.

Something snatched my spine.

I thought I heard a huge bottle uncorked, a lid sprung. Then this monstrous thing crawled down my back.

"Here!" cried Sir Robert. "Now!"

He struck with his cane. I fell, dead weight. He thrust the thing from my spine. He lifted it.

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The wind had cracked the dead tree branch and knocked it on my back.

Weakly, I tried to rise, shivering. "Silly," I said, a dozen times. "Silly. Damn awful silly!"

"Silly, no. Brandy, yes!" said Sir Robert. "Brandy?"

The sky was very black now. The rain swarmed over us.

Door after door after door, and at last into Sir Robert's country house study. A warm rich room where a fire smoldered on a drafty hearth. We devoured our sandwiches, waiting for the rain to cease. Sir Robert estimated that it would stop by eight o'clock when, by moonlight, we might return, ever so reluctantly, to Chatham Forest. I remembered the fallen branch, its spidering touch, and drank both wine and brandy.

"The silence in the forest," said Sir Robert, finishing his meal. "What murderer could achieve such a silence?"

"An insanely clever man with a series of baited, poisoned traps, with liberal quantities of insecticide, might kill off every bird, every rabbit, every insect," I said.

"Why should he do that?"

"To convince us that there is a large spider nearby. To perfect his act."

"We are the only ones who have noticed this silence, the police did not. Why should a murderer go to all that trouble for nothing?"

"Why *is* a murderer? you might well ask."

"I am not convinced." Sir Robert topped his food with wine. "This creature, with a voracious mouth, has cleansed the forest. With nothing left, he seized the children. The Silence, the murders, the prevalence of trap door spiders, the large earth balls, it all *fits*."

Sir Robert's fingers crawled about the desk top, quite like a washed, manicured spider in itself. He made a cup of his frail hands, held them up.

"At the bottom of a spider's burrow is a dust-bin into which drop insect remnants which the spider has dined. Imagine the dust-bin of our Grand Finnegan!"

I imagined. I visioned a Great Legged thing fastened to its dark lid under the forest and a child running, singing in the half light. A brisk insucked whisk of air, the song cut short, then nothing but an empty glade and the echo of a softly dropped lid, and beneath the dark earth the spider, fiddling, cabling, spinning the stunned child in its silently orchestrating legs.

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What could the dust-bin of such an incredible spider resemble? What the remnants of many banquets? I shuddered.

"Rain's letting up." Sir Robert nodded his approval. "Back to the forest. I've mapped the damned place for weeks. All the bodies were found in one half-open glade. That's where the assassin, if it was a man, arrives! Or where the unnatural silk-spinning, earth tunneling, architect of special doors, abides his tomb."

"*Must* I hear all this?" I protested.

"Listen more." Sir Robert downed the last of his burgundy. "The poor children's prolapsed corpses were found at thirteen day intervals. Which means that every two weeks our loathsome eight-legged hide and seeker must feed. Tonight is the 14th night after the last child was found, nothing but skin. Tonight our hidden friend *must* hunger afresh. So! Within the hour, I shall introduce you to Finnegan the great and horrible!"

"All of which," I said, "makes me want to drink."

"Here I go." Sir Robert stepped through one of his Louis the Fourteenth portals. "To find the last and final and most awful door in all my life. You will follow."

Damn, *yes!* I followed.

THE SUN HAD SET, the rain was gone and the clouds cleared off to show a cold and troubled moon. We moved in our own silence and the silence of the exhausted paths and glades while Sir Robert handed me a small silver pistol.

"Not that that would help. Killing an outsize arachnid is sticky. Hard to know where to fire the first shot. If you miss there'll be no time for a second. Damned things, large or small, move in the *instant!*"

"Thanks." I took the weapon. 'I need a drink.".

"Done." Sir Robert handed me a silver brandy flask. "Drink as needed."

I drank. "What about you?"

"I have my own special flask." Sir Robert lifted it. "For the right time."

"Why wait?"

"I must surprise the beast and mustn't be drunk at the encounter. Four seconds before the thing grabs me, I will imbibe of this dear Napoleon stuff, spiced with a rude surprise."

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"Surprise?"

"Ah, wait. You'll see. So will this dark thief of life. Now, dear sir, here we part company. I this way, you yonder. Do you mind?"

"Mind when I'm scared gutless? What's that?"

"Here. If I should vanish." He handed me a sealed letter. "Read it aloud to the constabulary. It will help them locate me and Finnegan, lost and found."

"Please, no details. I feel like a damned fool following you while Finnegan, *if* he exists, is underfoot snug and warm, saying, 'ah, those idiots above run about, freezing. I think I'll *let* them freeze."

"One hopes not. Get away now. If we walk together, he won't jump up. Alone, he'll peer out the merest crack, glom the scene with a huge bright eye, flip down again, *ssst*, and one of us gone to darkness."

"Not me, please. Not me."

We walked on about sixty feet apart and beginning to lose one another in the half moon light.

"Are you there?" called Sir Robert, from half the world away in leafy dark.

"I wish I weren't," I yelled back.

"Onward!" cried Sir Robert. "Don't lose sight of me. Move closer. We're near on the site. I can intuit, I almost *feel* — "

As a final cloud shifted, moonlight glowed brilliantly to show Sir Robert waving his arms about like antennae, eyes half shut, gasping with expectation.

"Closer, closer," I heard him exhale. "Near on. Be still. Perhaps..."

He froze in place. There was something in his aspect that made me want to leap, race, and yank him off the turf he had chosen.

"Sir Robert, oh, God!" I cried. "Run!"

He froze. One hand and arm orchestrated the air, feeling, probing, while his other hand delved, brought forth his silver-coated flask of brandy. He held it high in the moonlight, a toast to doom. Then, afflicted with need, he took one, two, three, my God, *four* incredible swigs!

Arms out, balancing the wind, tilting his head back, laughing like a boy, he swigged the last of his mysterious drink.

"All right, Finnegan, below and beneath!" he cried. "Come *get* me!"

He stomped his foot.

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Cried out victorious.

And *vanished.*

It was all over in a second.

A flicker, a blur, a dark bush had grown up from the earth with a whisper, a suction, and the thud of a body dropped and a door shut.

The glade was empty.

"Sir Robert. Quick!"

But there was no one to quicken.

Not thinking that I might be snatched and vanished, I lurched to the spot where Sir Robert had drunk his wild toast.

I stood staring down at earth and leaves with not a sound save my heart beating while the leaves blew away to reveal only pebbles, dry grass, and earth.

I must have lifted my head and bayed to the moon like a dog, then fell to my knees, fearless, to dig for lids, for tunneled tombs where a voiceless tangle of legs wove themselves, binding and mummifying a thing that had been my friend. This is his final door, I thought, insanely, crying the name of my friend.

I found only his pipe, cane, and empty brandy flask, flung down when he had escaped night, life, everything.

Swaying up, I fired the pistol six times here into the unanswering earth, a dumb thing gone stupid as I finished and staggered over his instant graveyard, his locked-in tomb, listening for muffled screams, shrieks, cries, but heard none. I ran in circles, with no ammunition save my weeping shouts. I would have stayed all night but a downpour of leaves, a great spidering flourish of broken branches fell to panic and suffer my heart. I fled, still calling his name to a silence lidded by clouds that hid the moon.

At his estate I beat on the door, wailing, yanking, until I recalled: it opened inward, it was unlocked.

Alone in the library, with only liquor to help me live, I read the letter that Sir Robert had left behind:

> My dear Douglas:
>
> I am old and have seen much but am not mad. Finnegan exists. My chemist had provided me with a sure poison that I will mix in my brandy for our walk. I will drink all. Finnegan, not

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knowing me as a poisoned morsel, will give me a swift invite. Now you see me, now you don't. I will then be the weapon of his death, minutes after my own. I do not think there is another outsize nightmare like him on Earth. Once gone, that's the end.

Being old, I am immensely curious. I fear not death, for my physicians tell me that if no accidents kill me, cancer will.

I thought of giving a poisoned rabbit to our nightmare assassin. But then I'd never know where he was or if he really existed. Finnegan would die unseen in his monstrous closet, and I never the wiser. This way, for one victorious moment, I will know. Fear for me. Envy me. Pray for me. Sorry to abandon you without farewells. Dear friend, carry on.

I folded the letter and wept.

No more was ever heard of him.

Some say Sir Robert killed himself, an actor in his own melodrama and that one day we shall unearth his brooding, lost and Gothic body and that it was he who killed the children and that his preoccupation with doors and hinges, and more doors that led him, crazed, to study this one species of spider, and wildly plan and build the most amazing door in history, an insane burrow into which he popped to die, before my eyes, thus hoping to perpetuate the incredible Finnegan.

But I have found no burrow. I do not believe a man could construct such a pit, even given Sir Robert's overwhelming passion for doors.

I can only ask, would a man murder, draw his victims' blood, build an earthen vault? For what motive? Create the finest secret exit in all time? Madness. And what of those large grayish balls of earth supposedly tossed forth from the spider's lair?

Somewhere, Finnegan and Sir Robert lie clasped in a velvet lined unmarked crypt, deep under. Whether one is the paranoiac alter ego of the other, I cannot say. But the murders have ceased. The rabbits once more rush in Chatham Glade and its bushes teem with butterflies and birds. It is another spring, and the children run again through a loud forest, no longer silent.

Finnegan and Sir Robert, *requiescat in pace.*

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Gene Wolfe's latest novel, Exodus from the Long Sun, *will appear on the stands about the same time as this issue. Gene is one of the most decorated writers in science fiction. His awards include the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the Prix Apollo, the British Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Award, two Nebula awards and two World Fantasy awards.*

"'The Man in the Pepper Mill,'" Gene writes, "began when my daughters were children and we still had one of those old-fashioned vacuum cleaners with a reusable cloth bag you (I) had to dump out. There was something odd looking among the dust and dog hair, and when I investigated I found that it was a tiny red lace brassiere. Clearly Barbie and Ken's camper van was a magical place, and I stored that away about four inches in back of my eyes. In a letter to Melissa Mia Hall not so long ago, I mentioned that for years I'd been wanting to do a dollhouse story, but it wouldn't quite jell. She sent a card on my birthday with a note wishing me luck with my dollhouse story, and in it she had sprinkled shiny confetti shaped like tiny dinosaurs — red, yellow, blue, and pink."

From those elements came this wonderful story.

The Man in the Pepper Mill

By Gene Wolfe

"YOU REALLY DON'T HAVE to worry, Tippy," Tippy's mother said in her kindest, gentlest voice. "It was just a minor tremor, and they happen all the time. We've had worse ones. I'm surprised it woke you up."

Tippy stared at his green beans. "I thought she might've bumped the table. That's all."

"You thought who might have bumped the table?" Tippy's mother's voice was harder, the voice that led to slaps.

"Nobody."

"Were you talking about Catherine?"

"No," Tippy said, still not sure how Cathy, dead, had become Catherine. "No, ma'am."

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"This hasn't been nearly as hard on you as it has on me, Tippy."

"No, ma'am."

"You hated Catherine. You're glad, I'm sure, that you'll never see her again. I loved her, and I'll always, always miss her."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your birthday — " Tippy's mother started to cry. "Your birthday's Sunday. Day after tomorrow."

"Uh huh." The plate was brown but almost green, with little dark green branches around the rim.

"What would you like, Tippy?"

"Nothing."

Tippy's mother sighed, an overworked woman on whose tired shoulders another burden had been laid. "I'll have to shop for it, Tippy. I'll have to do it tomorrow. Go to the bank in the morning, and go to several stores. What do you want?"

"Nothing." To make a show of eating, Tippy plunged his fork into a green bean. It was hard, and he knew it would taste raw.

"You're just a little kid." This was the voice he liked again. "You've got all this to deal with, and you're just a little kid."

He nodded miserably.

"Catherine's funeral was very, very expensive, Tippy. It cost almost as much as a new car, and I'll be paying it off for years. So I'd appreciate it very much if you didn't ask for something too expensive. Just one present, an inexpensive one. Will you do that for me, Tippy?"

"Sure.

"If you don't know what you want, you can tell me in the morning. Let's wait till then. I think that would be better."

It was on the tip of Tippy's tongue to say that nothing didn't cost anything, but he knew he could not get the words to come out without crying, and he was already old enough to be shamed by his tears.

"You can go out and play now, if you want to."

He went up to his room instead, passing the closed door of the room that had been Catherine's when she was Cathy. "I didn't hate you," he whispered to her blank and silent door. "We just fought about stuff sometimes. I never did hate you." He knew it was the truth, and that truth carried no force or authority whatsoever.

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He went into his own room, shut the door, and opened his window. The house was air-conditioned so he was not supposed to; but he did it anyway, needing to see the world beyond the house, and the rose and purple glory of sunset, without the intervention of glass.

There were other houses all around; he counted them to find out how many he could see from his window. Thirteen. Many had two stories, like his. After school he had gone to several and touched them, and they had been perfectly solid, brick and wood and concrete and stone.

He wanted to go down to the kitchen and look yet again at Catherine's dollhouse, still standing untouched on the kitchen table; but his mother was probably putting dishes into the dishwasher, so it was impossible.

Awakened by a flash of light, he sat up in bed, certain it had happened again. Slipping from beneath the blankets, he went to the window. A house across the street had lights on, and he could see others, dark but quite definitely there. He raised the sash, admitting warm night air that was nicer than the cold refrigerator air of the house. Nothing moved outside but the wind, and even the wind was kind.

Smiling to himself, he went back to bed and slept; and when he woke up again it was not like that at all.

He knew. The world had vanished, and another had been substituted for it. Outside, something enormous moved with inaudible steps. Briefly he saw its eye fill the window and whispered, "Cathy! Cathy!" Then it was gone. Light flashed, then the light was gone too.

He got out of bed, shivering. The house was dark, and the light switches were only paint on the walls.

In his mother's bedroom his mother lay upon her back with both arms above the blanket, their smooth white flesh as hard as plastic. Light flashed at her window; he looked out, but could see nothing. A man with painted-on hair who was not quite his father lay beside his mother; touched, he shimmered and winked out.

The stairs were still there, and the banister and the front hall rug; but the TV would not come on, and the clicker was gone. It was funny, he thought, how some things changed when other things did not. The kitchen was about the same, with a lot of his toys (borrowed by Cathy without permission) still scattered on the table. Cathy's dollhouse was

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gone, except for being all around. It could not be inside itself, after all.

He went out the back door.

The whole back yard was gone, as he had expected, the toys huge now, the Red Power Ranger (still on its feet) at least twice his size.

If Cathy saw him, she would probably pick him up, he decided, and if she did not like him she might throw him down. But Cathy seemed to have gone someplace else.

Boldly, he walked to the edge and looked about him at the dim vastness of the kitchen, at the distant cabinets and far away moon-like whiteness of the stove. Light raced over the kitchen toward him, bathed him for an instant, and faded, clear butter-yellow light from a dark and almost invisible tower above the sink. As he wondered at it, he glimpsed a tiny figure, silhouetted as the beam swept toward him again.

"Breakfast," Tippy's mother called, her voice floating through the dining room and the living room, along the hall and up the stairs. "Breakfast, Tippy."

Tippy brought his book. "Look at this one, Mom. Isn't it cool?" His mother nodded without looking, busy with cold cereal, milk, and bowls.

"It's got those spikes, but it eats grass and stuff. I could ride on it."

"They're gone, Tippy. They're dead, all of them. As dead as — never mind. What are you staring at in there?"

"Nothing."

"I thought perhaps you saw a dinosaur in the back yard."

"I was just looking at the thing that grinds up pepper," Tippy said, and added to himself, not now.

"Put down your book and eat your cereal." She set it before him.

"I wanted you to tell me how to say it. Please?"

She deigned to glance at the book. "Stegosaurus. You see a lot of them. I mean there are vitamin tablets and toys and so forth. Didn't you have a toy one?"

Tippy nodded. "Cathy took it." Obediently, he shut the book and spooned up Captain Crunch.

"You'll get it back eventually. I don't want you going into her room now. Do you understand?"

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He nodded.

"Not to get back a toy, and not for any other purpose at all."

"Okay."

"Have you decided what you want for your birthday?"

"I think so. Can I go in the kitchen a minute?"

"No. Eat your breakfast."

"If I don't touch anything?"

"No. What is it you'd like?" Tippy's mother patted her lips with a napkin and looked up at him. "How about some more action figures?"

"Huh uh."

"It wouldn't have to be just one, and I saw Baron Brute in K-Mart, with snakes and fangs and everything. You always liked Baron Brute."

"No." Thinking about the dinosaur, Tippy made his voice as firm as he could.

"Well, remember what I said last night. You have to make up your mind this morning." Tippy's mother picked up her cup and set it back down. "Could you, please, Tippy? The can's on the drainboard. Use the hot beverage tap."

As he spooned instant coffee into her cup, he stared at the graceful cylinder of dark wood on the windowsill. Once he ventured to reach for it, standing on tiptoe, his hand trembling. When his fingertips were half an inch away, his courage failed.

"Tippy?"

"In a minute." Steaming water trickled into her cup; he stirred, and returned with it in triumph.

"Did you rinse the spoon?"

He had not. "I put it in the sink. Mom, what's that big thing over there," he pointed, "that tells the ships?"

His mother looked up without comprehension. "That tells the ships what?"

"About rocks and things, and other ships, I guess. Like a church."

"The old lighthouse. Is that what you mean? That's right, you can see it from your window, can't you?"

"Cathy could see it too. She liked it. We talked about it sometimes."

Interested, his mother sipped coffee without taking her eyes off him. "That's a good thing to remember. I'll always remember it, now that

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you've told me, and I want you to try to remember it, too, Tippy."

Encouraged, he nodded. "I know what I want now. Can I tell you?"

"A toy lighthouse? I doubt that I could find one. How about a flashlight, so you can play lighthouse? A flashlight would be easy."

He shook his head. "I want you to take me up there. So I can see the real one."

"Instead of a present?"

"That would be the present," he explained patiently. "Going up there."

"It's over on the other side of the bay." She spoke half to herself. "It would be a nice ride, I suppose."

IT WAS. Down Larch Street to wide and busy Countryside, onto the Interstate and off again, and up Windpoint Road in a series of curves that were gracefully sweeping at first, then breathtaking. Tippy's mother put down all the windows and smiled out at the rocks and the dry brown hills, and Tippy thought how pretty she looked with her bright silk scarf at her throat and her feather earrings spinning around in the wind. Suddenly there were no more rocks or dead grass on his side of the car, only air and sky and tossing water.

"That's the ocean down there, Tippy." There was fear enough in her voice to make him uncomfortable. "It doesn't look like the water that comes out of the faucet at home, does it?"

Half dumb with wonder, he managed to say, "Huh uh."

"It is. Take out the salt, filter and chlorinate it, and it would be the same stuff. The only difference is that this water doesn't try to fool you. Your grandmother's bones are there, with the bones of thousands and thousands of other people "

She pointed. "Look up ahead. You can see the tower where the light is."

A square green sign beside the road announced WINDPOINT LIGHT 1/4 MILE in white letters of modest size.

A turn, a climb, and a wiggle, and a strip of asphalt scarcely wide enough for one car led them steeply toward the edge of a cliff. There was a small parking lot nestled among pines and white birches, and another sign, so modest as to seem ashamed.

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As they got out of the car, the pepper-mill man appeared in the doorway of the little wooden house attached to the brown tower. "*Come on in!*"

"Do you like this, Tippy?" Tippy's mother asked while they walked up a crunchy path of little rocks. "I hope you're not disappointed."

He nodded, puzzled; there had been thumps when the pepper-mill man stepped back from the doorway.

Tippy's mother halted at the doorway to fumble in her purse. "A dollar and a quarter? Is that all? It seems very reasonable."

The pepper-mill man grinned, lifting the seaman's cap he wore and pushing gray-streaked hair beneath it as if he had just put it on. "Then you can buy something in our little store." He waved toward three display cases. "We've got note cards and stationery with our lighthouse on them, postcards, even night lights. Books on the coast, and scientific coloring books for children. Anything you buy will help us preserve the lighthouse."

She handed him two dollars. "Would you like something, Tippy? That could be a birthday present, too. Or would you like to see the lighthouse first?"

That was easy. "The lighthouse," Tippy decided; but he grabbed up a book that looked interesting as he passed the rack.

The pepper-mill man followed him with a thump, and Tippy turned back to stare. "Like a pirate!"

"Exactly." The pepper-mill man's grin, which had been wide already, grew wider still. "Bit off by a whale, and a yo-ho-ho to ye, young Jim Hawkins."

"His name's Tippy," Tippy's mother said, and for some reason seemed almost unable to talk. "I—I mean it's Tiptree, really. For the, you know, the writer. But she's dead, and — and..."

"I owe you seventy-five cents." The pepper-mill man stopped to ring a cash register. "My name's Buster Hill."

"He took a book." Tippy's mother spoke so softly that he could scarcely hear her. "I have to pay you for that, too."

"Just to look at," Tippy explained. "I'll put it back after."

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"Will — will we have to, you know, climb up things? Or look down at the water? I wasn't afraid driving here, really I wasn't, but I don't like heights."

"You don't have to go up to the light if you don't want to," the pepper-mill man declared; and Tippy, deducing that it was possible to do so, dashed ahead.

A flight of iron steps shaped like slices of pie wound around an iron pole inside the lighthouse. They were narrow, which mattered not at all to his flying feet. They were also high, which mattered less if anything, because to a degree that he found wonderful they made it possible for him to climb with a most impressive rumble and roar despite his sneakers.

At the top, a little balcony with iron railings circled the huge light and its complicated-looking machinery. Tippy trotted around it several times looking at the brown land and the gloriously unquiet water, waved to his mother and the pepper-mill man far below, then sat down where he could not see them — nor they him — with his legs dangling from the balcony.

The book was easily twice as good as it had appeared, with many brightly colored pictures of strange ships with billowing sails and snapping banners. There were pirates, and men blacker than the man down the street Tippy's mother said was black even though he was not, and a captain with a long yellow robe with a black dragon on it and a long, long mustache. It was all interesting, and some of it was very interesting — so interesting that Tippy kept going back to those pictures again and again so he could study them and then look out to sea and imagine himself on whatever kind of ship it was.

Still he smiled when he heard the thumps of the pepper-mill man's pirate leg on the iron steps. Tippy had wanted to leave his mother and the pepper-mill man alone together for a long while, and was glad to have done so; but he wanted to talk to the pepper-mill man, too.

"Hello," the pepper-mill man said when he reached the little balcony. "Are you afraid to climb down? I can carry you."

Tippy shook his head.

"Then get up and let's go. You can keep that book if you like it."

Tippy shook his head again. "I want to tell you."

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"About what?" Holding onto the railing, the pepper-mill man crouched beside him.

"What happens at night. And ask you."

"What happens at night," the pepper-mill man said, and there was no question on the end of it.

"Yeah." Now that the moment had come, Tippy found it hard to choose the right words. "This is a — a big brown thing then. On the windowsill."

For a second he was sure the pepper-mill man had not understood him, then the pepper-mill man sat down heavily beside him, letting his real leg and his pirate leg hang off just as Tippy's legs did. Then the pepper-mill man took a big, deep breath as if he were going to say something very important, and let it out, and took another one, and said, "Are you the little boy who lives in the dollhouse?"

Solemnly, Tippy nodded.

"You and your mother. She was looking back at the city and trying to show me where you live, and I got an idea she might be the one."

Tippy shook his head. "She doesn't. I'm all alone in there."

"In the dollhouse."

Tippy nodded, and after a long, long time the pepper-mill man said, "Do you know why it's happening?"

"I was going to ask you."

"I don't know." Suddenly the pepper-mill man's hand was holding Tippy's arm very tightly. "It's not a dream. I keep telling myself that it's just a dream, but it isn't." He let out air with a big whoosh.

"No," Tippy agreed.

"Did you see me last night? I saw you."

Tippy nodded. "That was the best I ever did. That was how I knew it was you when you were in your store."

"My job..." The pepper-mill man let the words trail off into the blue sky, and started over. "I live here all the time, Tippy. I sleep at night when the light's on, mostly, because we're closed then. But twice every night, at eleven and three, I've got to go up and inspect the light to make sure the gears are greased and everything's working."

Tippy nodded to show he understood.

"Usually I stay up until eleven watching TV. I make my eleven

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o'clock inspection and go to bed, with my alarm clock set for two forty-five. I get up then and make my second inspection. That's when it happens, when I get to the top and step out here."

"It's when I wake up way late at night," Tippy confided. "Then I can look up at the windowsill and see you, only it isn't a pepper mill any more, it's this — only little like me."

The pepper-mill man was silent for a long time. At last he said, "That's your kitchen I see out there. The big white thing's your refrigerator, isn't it? It looks like one. And you don't understand what's been happening to us any better than I do."

"A *little* better, maybe."

"You know what I did last night? I stayed up all night. I'd been going back to bed after my three o'clock inspection the way I always did, and in the morning I'd tell myself it had been a dream."

"It's not," Tippy said softly.

"Last night, I waited right up here. I could go around on the other side and see your kitchen, and that's what I did, mostly. But when I was on this side, I could see the ocean and the stars like always. Around four-thirty the sun came up, and your kitchen was just mist, all the solid things my light had been showing, the doll house and the stove and refrigerator. Everything. It was only mist, and then they were gone and the town was there just like always."

"It's Cathy," Tippy explained. When he saw that the pepper-mill man did not understand he added, "It's her doll house."

"There's a real doll house then."

Tippy nodded.

"In your kitchen, on the kitchen table."

Tippy nodded again. "Mom won't move it or let me touch it. By-and-by is what she says."

The pepper-mill man sighed. "Cathy was your sister, two years older. Your mother told me while we were waiting for you to come down. She talked about how hard it had been for you, and her, too, and I'm sure it must have been. How long ago was it?"

Tippy lifted his small shoulders and let them fall. "Not very long."

"A week?"

"Longer than that."

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"A month?"

"I don't think so."

"I ought to ask you about Cathy, since you say she's doing it." The pepper-mill man released Tippy's arm and wiped his hands on his faded jeans. "Where's your father, Tippy? Does he know about this?"

Tippy shook his head. "Mom made him go away. That's what she says." Then, unable to control himself, he blurted, "She likes you."

The pepper-mill man seemed not to have heard. "Was this before Cathy died?"

"A long time before. Before Christmas."

When the pepper-mill man said nothing, Tippy returned to his previous topic. "Mom likes you."

The pepper-mill man shook his head. "I'm too old for her."

Offended by the necessity of making such things clear to a grown-up, Tippy explained very slowly, "You *can't* be too old if she *likes* you."

"It wouldn't work, young Jim."

"It would!"

"Before long she'd make me go away, just like she did your dad. That's if she ever let me into her house at all. I might not have the same things wrong with me your dad had, but to a woman, any woman, every man's got one thing wrong with him."

"It wouldn't be like that. You're just pretending."

The pepper-mill man declined to argue with a child. "You think your dead sister's doing it."

"She is. She thinks a whole lot about somebody being with Mom and me the way our dad used to be. And she likes you just like Mom does. You're the one."

Less distinctly than they heard the crashing of the waves on the rocks below, they could hear Tippy's mother calling to them from the solid, sheltered land on the far side of the light.

"She didn't want to come up here after you," the pepper-mill man told Tippy. "She's afraid of heights. She didn't want me to, either, because of my leg. I said I climbed up twice every night, but she still didn't want me to."

Tippy nodded solemnly. "I knew it would be like that. I wanted you and her to be by yourselves."

"Well, we were," the pepper-mill man acknowledged. And when they

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had both looked out to the horizon and listened to the faint and lonely cries of the gulls, he added, "We talked a little bit, that's all. We didn't kiss or anything."

"That's good," Tippy told him.

"Don't you like mushy stuff, young Jim?"

"I mean it's good you talked. Was your leg really bit off by a whale?"

The pepper-mill man shook his head. "A land mine. An anti-personnel mine."

Tippy nodded sympathetically.

"I've got a nice prosthetic leg the VA gave me. That's what I wear when I go into town. But out here I wear this and the sailor clothes, because that's what our visitors want to see. It helps."

"Do you like living here?" Tippy asked.

"Not really. Or anyhow not very much." The pepper-mill man cocked his head to listen as Tippy's mother called again. "You think she'll come up after us in a minute?"

Tippy ignored the question. "Then come live with us. We've got a nice house."

"It wouldn't work, young Jim. You think she'll come?"

Tippy shook his head. "She might call the firemen or something."

The pepper-mill man grinned. "That ought to take a while."

"Tell more about your leg."

"There's not much more to tell, young Jim. When I got out of the Army hospital, I went back to college and studied journalism — newspaper work. I had a job with a little paper down south for a while, and then with a magazine. But I didn't like the work or the people, so I went into public relations."

"What's that?" Tippy wanted to know.

"Helping people or companies deal with the press and so on, mostly it's with newspapers and the TV news departments. They'll crucify you if you let them, especially if you don't give them anything else to chew on."

Tippy nodded wisely. "Like, if somebody found a live dinosaur? A real one?"

"You've got it."

Tippy's mother called again, and the pepper-mill man prepared to stand up. "The agency I'd been with closed, and I got another job, but it

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only lasted a couple of months, so I applied to the Town Council here, and they gave me this. I was supposed to get a real public relations job pretty soon, but I've been here about two years. I deal with the public, so that's public relations, I guess, and sometimes some paper or magazine will do a story on the lighthouse "

"You ought to come and live where we do," Tippy insisted doggedly.

"It wouldn't work, young Jim, believe me." The pepper-mill man got up. "I'm too old for her, and I've got this leg and no good job."

Tippy stood too. "Yes, it would. Cathy thinks so, and so do I."

"You let me go down those steps first. If you slip or something, I don't want you falling down and off."

Tippy agreed disconsolately.

"You're sure it's your dead sister?" the pepper-mill man asked as they walked a quarter of the way around the light to the opening that returned them to the iron stair. "A little girl?"

"I see her sometimes," Tippy declared. "Sometimes she looks in through the window, and then she's real big. I'm afraid to go outside when she's out there."

The pepper-mill man glanced at him over his shoulder as he started down. "I suppose I would be, too. But couldn't somebody else be doing it? Maybe she's just in it the same way we are."

"It's how she played!" Tippy insisted; frustration was making him angry. "No other houses, because she didn't have any more doll houses to be them. There's a doll in the bed for Mom, because she had that doll and that's where she put it, in bed in her dollhouse. Only she doesn't have any for me and you, so we get to be really us. Don't you see?"

The pepper-mill man looked around again. "In the morning the mamma doll turns into your real mother?"

"Yes!"

From the bottom of the steps, Tippy's real mother called, "*You're all right! I hear you!*"

The pepper-mill man called back, "He's fine. We've been having a little talk."

"She's real pretty," Tippy reminded the pepper-mill man, sotto voce; impelled by his still-developing sense of honor, he added reluctantly, "She's sort of crazy though."

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"They all are, young Jim," the pepper-mill man whispered back; there was a sorrow in his voice that Tippy did not understand, but after he had spoken they were too close to the ground and Tippy's mother to talk.

As the pepper-mill man took the last step down, holding onto the railing and groping for the floor with the leathershod tip of his pirate leg as he always did, he said, "We had a talk up there about some things that have been bothering Tippy. I hope you don't mind."

"That was very nice of you," Tippy's mother said, and her eyes shone.

"I'd like to think so, and I'd like to think I've done some good. I tried to explain to Tippy that people don't really die the way a flower does, or a fish, even if we use the same word for it. His sister's body is dead like that, but her soul hasn't died, and never will. It lives with God in Heaven."

Tippy understood that the explaining was really now. "She's real strong up there, too," he assured his mother. "Most dead people aren't, but Cathy's really, really strong. Catherine, I mean."

"Loving, too," Tippy's mother murmured, "she always had so much love for all of us."

"It may simply be that she wants something very badly," the pepper-mill man told Tippy. When nobody was listening, Tippy said, *I know what it is*. But he said it to himself alone.

The pepper-mill man walked them to their car; and when she was ready to get into it, Tippy's mother offered him her hand. "Are you sure you won't let me pay for Tippy's book?"

He shook his head. "It's a birthday present from me to him, and if you paid that would spoil it."

"I want you to come for dinner sometime. If we have dinner at seven, you'll have plenty of time to get back up here."

"Okay," the pepper-mill man said, "that would be swell."

Tippy, listening from the car, felt certain that neither really meant it, so he knelt in the driver's seat and stuck his head out. "If we needed you bad, would you come to help about the TV people like you said?"

"Sure," the pepper-mill man told him.

"Like, if I find a real live dinosaur. There'll be lots of people from TV to take pictures and everything."

Tippy's mother laughed.

"If you find a live dinosaur," the pepper-mill man told Tippy, "I'll be

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there inside an hour, and that's a promise."

Tippy had to back away to let his mother get into the car. "I think I'm going to find one pretty soon, so don't forget."

"*I won't!*" the pepper-mill man called as they pulled away. He waved.

"Well," Tippy's mother said to Tippy when they had turned back onto Windpoint Road, "that was nicer than I expected. Did you have a good time?"

He nodded.

"You don't mind not having a party for your class this year?"

"No," Tippy said; and when the scary part of the road was over he added thoughtfully, "It was swell."

IT HAD SEEMED so easy when he had gone to bed. Now he snuggled his head under the covers and tried to pretend he was still asleep while Cathy moved outside in the kitchen darkness, peering through the windows of her dollhouse, dead and yet so very much still there.

It would not work, he knew, and something terrible would happen instead, something awful beyond imagining — it could not work. Slowly, he pushed away sheet and blankets, put his bare feet over the side of his bed, and stood up, becoming by that act of will and courage a small boy so nearly grown that he was practically a man.

Out in the light-brushed darkness beyond the kitchen door, toys (many of them his) littered the tabletop like tumbled monuments, the Red Power Ranger alone still upright. For a moment he stopped beside it, his hand caressing the smooth crimson plastic; but he came scarcely to its waist, and he knew that any attempt of his to lift and carry it would be futile.

Beyond it sprawled Spider-Man, and even more tempting, Luke Skywalker. Resolutely, Tippy passed them by.

A Scottie as big as a mastiff lay nose-to-nose with a West Highland White, impelled by the magnets at their feet; although he thought he might have managed one such dog, they could not be separated, and in combination would constitute an impossible load. They had been Cathy's, in any case. Cathy might object to his using her toys, he felt; but she could not reasonably resent his using his own.

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The stegosaurus was pink and mercifully small, one of a set whose members were mostly lost; its tail spikes made fine handles, and made it possible for him to drag it behind him without much difficulty. Once when he stopped to catch his breath and get a better grip, he scanned the pepper mill that was now a lighthouse, perched upon its distant window-sill; it would be nice if the pepper-mill man saw what he was doing, Tippy thought, and waved. But the time for the pepper-mill man's inspection had not yet come, or had come and gone.

The step before the kichen door presented Tippy with a major difficulty, and the doorway itself with another nearly as great. It proved necessary to lift the stegosaurus onto its wide pink feet, and then for him to heave with all his might — grunting in unconscious imitation of his father — with hands clasped beneath the stegosaurus's maddeningly smooth pink chin.

And thus at last, taking many short backward steps and somewhat aided by the counterweight of the tail, position the front feet before the doorway. And then to climb between the double rows of great, flat backplates to the tail, and lift there (it was heavier, but much easier to hold) and grunting again to push the entire bulky pink saurian into the kitchen, knocking over the kitchen table.

And last to run around to the front of the dollhouse and re-enter through the front door, and so upstairs and back to bed gasping.

When daylight through his window woke him it seemed a dream, exactly as the pepper-mill man had said. For a minute that was in fact ten or more, Tippy lay on his back with his hands behind his head, blinking up at the bright posters on his ceiling and thinking about it.

To begin with, it hadn't happened, probably.

(Downstairs, something large and heavy moved in a small, slow way, so that the two-by-fours and four-by-fours, the plywood and sheetrock of the house creaked briefly like the timbers of a ship. Then it was still again.)

But if it had happened — Tippy had remembered that the pepper-mill man had seen Cathy's dollhouse too — it wouldn't work. A toy pink dinosaur in the kitchen would not and could not become a real dinosaur just because the Blue Velveteen Rabbit in that book had changed into a

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real rabbit. Real things could change into things in books, but book things could not, not ever, turn into really true things.

Not unless somebody made them.

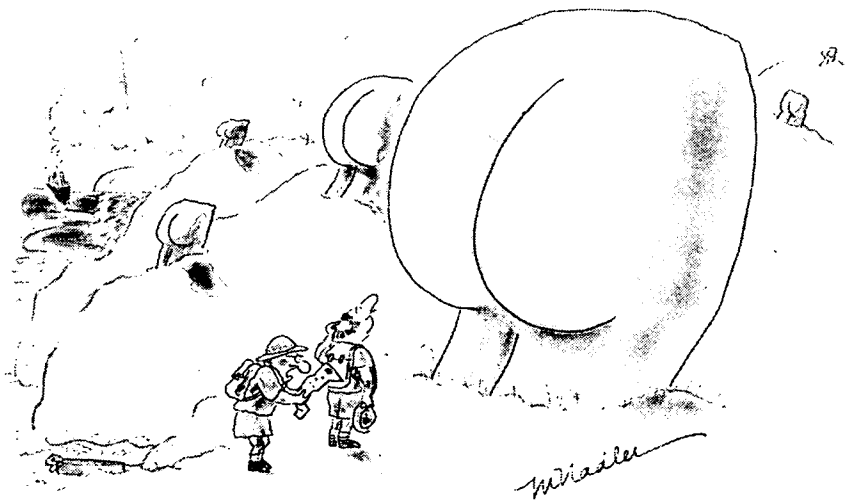
(Tippy's mother's pink mules went *clop-clop-clop* down the stairs to fix breakfast. Soon — very soon — she would call him to come and eat, and she would expect him to be up and dressed. Today was Monday, a school day.)

Of course — Tippy sighed and yawned, and sat up in bed rubbing his eyes — the pink stegosaurus had not been in a book, and perhaps that made a difference. It had been a real toy animal. No, he thought, it still is. It's a real toy, and a stegosaurus. Was that the same as a stegosaur? Only not a real —

Tippy's mother screamed; and Tippy, hearing her, truly woke up and ran out of his room to tell her it was all right.

And though his feet flew, his mind flew faster. Would Cathy stop playing with her dollhouse when the pepper-mill man came? She probably would, Tippy decided, but it seemed a shame. Batman and Robin waited under the bed, and there was a super-cool dragon in Walgreens. But a dinosaur — !

Was it still pink? The dinosaurs in books were gray, mostly. Tippy's mother was babbling into the telephone, so he went to look.



"You fool! This is Keister *Island!"*

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Patricia Matthews has written many novels, from mystery to horror to science fiction. She has also published quite a few short stories, including a number in F&SF.

"At the Bottom of the Garden" is one of the most gentle stories we have ever published. Its inspiration came from the poem "Fairies" written by Rose Fyleman, about fairies at the bottom of a garden.

"I could only remember the first two lines of the poem, couldn't remember where I had read it or the name of the author," Patricia writes, "but that first line has always been very evocative for me. When I think of it, I think of Peter Pan, and Kensington Gardens, and the Water Babies."

And of this story.

At the Bottom of the Garden

By Patricia Matthews

MANDY CAME TO A DEAD stop on the pathway, as she caught sight of the little man seated upon the low stone wall at the bottom of the garden. She knew — in a flash of insight — exactly what he was.

Admittedly, he was larger than she might have imagined; however, he was much smaller than most grown men, and she had already come to terms with the fact that things in real life did not always look exactly like their counterparts in pictures.

It was the little man's clothing that made her certain. He was dressed in tight dark green trousers, and his white shirt was exactly like the ones worn by princes in picture books — full sleeves tight at the wrist, and the vee at the neck tied with a lace. Over the shirt he wore a pale yellow vest, with large shiny buttons.

Overwhelmed, she stared at him, her finger in her mouth. He was very pretty: with a narrow, clever face; bright, blue eyes; and a thatch of curls as golden as her own. She looked at his ears, but could not see their tops, which were hidden by his hair.

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He smiled at her — very kindly — and said in a soft voice: "Well, what have we here? What a pretty little lady. Do you have a name, little lady?"

The way he spoke his words was strange — it sounded to Mandy like "lit'l liedy" — but she understood, and was suffused by a warm surge of pleasure.

Taking her finger out of her mouth, she returned his smile.

"Amanda Armisted." She pronounced it carefully, then added, "Mandy."

The little man's smile widened. "Well, Mandy, I'm very pleased to meet you. My name's Elf Hampton, and you may call me Elf."

Mandy nodded; of course it would be something like that.

"And how old are you, Miss Mandy?"

"Five." She held up her right hand, fingers and thumb spread. "But I'm almost six."

He nodded gravely. "Well, that's an excellent age to be. I used to be five myself, once — but that was a very long time ago."

Mandy nodded. It would have to be, wouldn't it? Inside her narrow chest, she could feel her heart pounding with excitement. She realized how privileged she was to be talking to one of *them*; to be having him discuss such things with her.

"You're part of the new family in the gate house, I take it."

Mandy nodded, pointing up the slope to the red brick house near the main road.

"It's a pretty little place, isn't it?" Elf said, just as he might say to a grown-up.

She straightened, smoothed down her dress, and cleared her throat. Her voice, when it came out, sounded squeaky. "Yes. Do you live here, in the garden?"

Elf's eyes twinkled, and his smile widened. "Well, no, not exactly. I live over there, in the gardener's cottage."

Mandy's gaze followed the direction of his pointing finger to the small cottage on the other side of the garden, and felt that her pleasure might overcome her. Shingled, chimnied, surrounded by flowers, it was an Enchanted Cottage to the last detail.

She took a deep breath. "It's beautiful," she said, clasping her small hands before her chest. "Just like the dwarf's cottage in Snow White!"

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Elf laughed. "If you were a bit older, I might think that was a reference to my height, but now that you mention it, you're right. Would you like to see the inside?"

She paused for a moment, her glance going to the gate house. Her mother and Uncle Ted had been asleep when she had sneaked out of the house; and, if things went as usual, they could be counted on to sleep for at least some time longer.

She smiled and nodded; but Elf had seen her hesitation. "Perhaps you should check with your mother first. I'll go with you, if you like."

Mandy felt panic, like a cold wave, rise through her body. She shook her head fiercely, afraid of losing this chance. Her mother, at the best of times, was unpredictable; and was usually in bad temper in the early morning.

"No," Mandy said firmly. "Suzie is still asleep." And then, although she knew that it was in all likelihood a lie, "She won't mind."

She studied Elf's face. He looked doubtful, but then smiled.

"All right then. Just for a few minutes. You can make a longer visit at another time."

Mandy's face could hardly contain her smile. She watched with pleasure as Elf — very gracefully — jumped down from the wall. As he took her hand in his, he frowned slightly, and raised her arm. She saw his eyes darken. She pulled her arm down, but she knew he had seen it — the ugly purple bruise just below where her short sleeve ended. She felt embarrassed that he had seen the flaw.

"It's all right," he said gently. "How did it happen?"

She looked away. "I fell down. I'm clumsy sometimes."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, we're all clumsy sometimes, I suppose. Well, let's get on to the cottage."

The path to the cottage wound through the thickest part of the garden, among the prettiest flowers; and at one point, when she sought to leave the path to examine a particularly attractive stand of hollyhocks, Elf pulled her back.

"No, no. Not there, love, there's an old well there, and I haven't yet seen to filling it in. The cover is old; but now that you're here, I'll get a good cover on it straight away. Until then, you must stay away from it. All right?"

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Mandy nodded. She could see it now, the stones all fallen away. It looked like an old, round door into the ground. She nodded, happy to do what Elf told her, wanting him to see how good she could be.

They were nearing the cottage now, and Mandy was skipping with excitement. She could see white curtains at the windows, and smoke coming from the stone chimney. Elf's hand was warm and gentle around her own; and she felt protected, comforted, and happy.

Inside, the little house reminded her of Mrs. Turner's apartment. Mrs. Turner had lived next door to Mandy and her mother in the city, and the elderly woman had been Mandy's sitter when her mother went out. This meant that Mandy and Mrs. Turner had spent a great deal of time together, and had grown very close. Mrs. Turner had wonderful things in her apartment, especially the books. Some of them had full-page colored pictures of another world, a world that was magical and beautiful, where everything — even if scary things sometimes happened — turned out all right. Mandy liked to think of Mrs. Turner as her grandmother — she had none of her own — and Mrs. Turner, whose children and grandchildren lived far away, had seemed pleased.

Mandy had cried when her mother told her they were moving again, to live in the country with the new uncle, Uncle Ted. From experience, she knew that Mrs. Turner and the comfort she provided would be lost to her. Mrs. Turner had given her a book of poems as a going-away present, and it was Mandy's most prized possession.

"Well, how do you like it?" Elf was smiling down at her.

She nodded, eyes wide. "It's beautiful!" she said truthfully. "You have doilies," She pointed to the little lace cloths that adorned the arms of the sofa and the plump chairs.

Elf laughed. "Imagine, she knows what doilies are. What a clever girl."

Mandy laughed too. Happiness fizzed in her like soda-pop bubbles. "Mrs. Turner told me."

She turned, taking it all in: the paintings; the silver, the ivory carvings, and china wonders in the tall glass and wood cabinet — she must look at them closer — the beautiful rugs.

"Harry! Oh, Harry, we have company!" Elf was calling. Curious, she turned to see another man come through an inner doorway. He was a bit

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taller than Elf, and appeared older. He had a jolly round face, pink cheeks, and a soft brown beard. He was dressed in soft tan trousers, cream colored shirt, and wide brown suspenders. He looked very much, she thought, like Santa Claus, only younger. He was accompanied by a small brown and white dog, with a pushed-in face and bright eyes. Mandy could not suppress an exclamation of delight. She had always wanted a dog, but because of "circumstances" had never been allowed to have one.

Then, embarrassed, Mandy looked up at the man shyly. He, in turn, seemed surprised to see her.

"Well then, Alf, who's this? One of the renters?"

Elf nodded. "The youngest, I believe. Mandy, by name."

Harry — that must be his name — came over to Mandy and squatted down by her side. He smelled of cinnamon and shaving lotion, and his eyes were twinkly and, like Elf's, kind.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Mandy."

He held out a nice-looking square hand, and Mandy, without hesitation put hers into it. He shook it firmly.

"And this is Buster." He looked down at the little dog, who was sitting quietly, as if waiting to be introduced. "Now, would you like to join Alf and me for some cocoa and a cinnamon bun? They're fresh out of the oven."

Mandy nodded gratefully, noticing that she was, suddenly, very hungry.

"So where have you been?" her mother said crossly, pushing a strand of red hair out of her eyes. "I've told you and told you that I don't want you running around outside while I'm asleep."

Mandy hung her head, and made her voice docile. Long ago she had learned that it was the best way to deflect her mother's bad humor. "I'm sorry. But I woke up early, and it was so pretty out. I wanted to see the garden."

Her mother gave a sniff, and turned to the large, heavy-bodied man seated opposite her at the breakfast table. "She's obsessed with gardens. It's all because that old woman who lived next door has filled her head with stories from those damned books of hers; fairies, and princesses, dragons, magic gardens — a lot of nonsense!"

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She turned back to Mandy, who kept her eyes carefully on her plate. "You might as well learn now that it's all a bunch of crap! The real world is what you have to live in; and you might as well know that from the beginning. There isn't any magic. No elves. No fairies."

"Did you get into anything you shouldn't, in the garden I mean?"

Mandy thought quickly. Did her mother know about Elf and Harry and the cottage? Could she, as a grown-up, see them?

"You didn't bother the owners, did you? I don't want you bothering the owners."

Mandy frowned. The owners? Could her mother mean Elf and Harry? And what did they own?

"The people in the cottage," her mother said crossly. "Have you been bothering them?"

Mandy felt familiar panic rising. How much was it safe to say, to tell?

"I met Elf," she said, finally, "and Harry, too."

"Elf and Harry?" Her mother, thin eyebrows climbing her forehead, looked at Uncle Ted, who put down the paper, an unpleasant smile on his full-lipped mouth.

He let out a loud laugh that made Mandy jump. "She means Alfred Hampton and his 'friend' Harry, our landlords."

He leaned forward, his heavy arms on the table, and Mandy drew back. She didn't like Uncle Ted very much. He was too big, too loud, and he pushed at people. She didn't think he liked her very much either. She was very surprised that he knew about Elf and Harry, that he could see them; but perhaps he saw them differently. Perhaps, to grown-ups, they seemed to be regular people. The idea seemed plausible.

"So you met the neighbors, huh?"

Hesitantly, Mandy nodded.

"And what did you think of them?"

Emboldened by his interest, Mandy said, "I think they're very nice. They let me look at their house."

Mandy's mother slapped the table with her hand. "You went into their house? Haven't I told you a hundred times not to go anywhere with strangers, particularly men? Do you want to get hurt?"

Uncle Ted laughed again. "Don't sweat it, Suzie. You don't have to worry about those two."

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Suzie stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He grinned. "They're — " he glanced over at Mandy, and she knew that meant he was going to say something that he didn't want her to understand — "a little light in their loafers, if you know what I mean."

Suzie frowned. "Well, you didn't tell me that."

Uncle Ted seemed to be enjoying himself, and Mandy couldn't understand why. What was he talking about? It didn't make sense.

"The place belongs to Hampton; he inherited from his grandmother." He chuckled. "The locals say that the old woman was real strange. The kids around here still call her 'The Witch Lady.' It must run in the family; Hampton's a weird little duck. Lived all his life in England somewhere, but came over here when the old girl kicked off. They say that the property used to be quite a showplace, till the big house burned down. Acres and acres. Now there's just the gate house and the gardener's house, though I gather the old lady left some money as well, and Hampton makes a little renting out this house. He's a writer of some kind...kid's books I think. I don't know if the other one does anything. Probably just keeps house."

He snickered. "Wait till you see the way they dress. And Hampton has this sissy English accent. Sweetest little thing you ever saw. Almost as sweet as you!"

He reached out and grabbed one of Suzie's breasts. Mandy looked away. She didn't at all like the way this conversation was going. She didn't understand it, but she knew that Uncle Ted was talking bad about Elf and Harry. She could see and feel the meanness in him.

"Not in front of the kid," her mother was saying, but she always said that, even when one of the uncles was doing things to her in front of Mandy; and Mandy knew that this was the signal for her to go out to play, or go to her room and look at her books.

"May I be excused," she said, and Uncle Ted grunted, and she got up from the table and went outside where she wouldn't hear all the noise that they were going to make. She wanted to think about Elf and Harry and the Enchanted Cottage. She wanted to pretend that she lived there, with Elf and Harry and Buster, and all the pretty things, where it was cozy and warm and safe, and smelled of cinnamon.

* * *

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"Now watch, sweet thing," Elf said, dexterously taking the web of string from between Mandy's fingers with his own. "You take it like this, and it makes another pattern, another design. Do you see?"

Mandy nodded. Elf was teaching her to play Cat's Cradle, and she liked it a lot, particularly when he told her that the patterns that the string made were very old and very magical.

Suzie and Uncle Ted were gone for the day, and Elf and Harry were looking after her. The last few weeks had been wonderful. She had seen, or visited, Elf and Harry almost every day. When Suzie had found out how much the two men liked Mandy, and that they were only too happy to have her company, she had quickly taken advantage of that fact. The only cloud that threatened to mar Mandy's sky was the nagging thought that all this would end; that one day, out of the blue, her mother would tell her that they were leaving, moving on. There would be a new uncle, and a new place to live, and she would never see Elf and Harry again.

But now, here on the sunny porch of the cottage, she did not think of that, but only of the wonderful pattern that she held in her fingers, and of how happy she was.

Elf patted her head. "Now that's enough for today. Why don't you play a bit of ball with Buster while I help Harry fix our lunch?"

Mandy nodded, and reluctantly relaxed the Cat's Cradle, and slipped the string from her fingers. Buster sat watching her, his dark eyes bright with expectancy.

She threw the ball for Buster to retrieve until she got tired and hot; then she and Buster went round to the back of the cottage where the grape arbor offered a cool retreat, and where she could pick some mint from the patch by the back door and rub it between her fingers until she smelled all cool and sweet.

As she squatted beside the mint patch, the voices of Elf and Harry came through the kitchen window. She listened to them lazily, thinking that the rise and fall of their voices sounded like an odd sort of music.

"Sometimes it's all I can do not to hit the woman..." That was Harry.

"I mean she's unfit to have a child! From what I gather, there's been one man after another since the father ran off; no stability at all. It appears that there's no other family, no grandparents or aunts or real uncles. Mandy's such a sweet child. What will happen to her?"

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"I know, Harry." That was Elf. "I feel the same. You've seen the bruises. I don't know if it's the mother, or the man — they're both heavy drinkers — but somebody is abusing that child. She always says that she's fallen; but she won't meet your eye when she says it. Poor little tyke. I wish that she was ours, Harry. I'd like to have a child."

Harry's voice was all soft now. "So would I, Alf, you know that."

Both voices grew too soft to hear, and Mandy sat very quietly, thinking over what she had heard. She had thought that she would feel bad if anyone ever knew about the bad times with Suzie; but now, somehow, she didn't; she only felt relief that these two, whom she had come to love, knew, and that they understood.

IT WAS ALREADY growing dark, and Mandy was playing Go Fish with Harry and Elf, when Uncle Ted and Suzie returned. She could hear the roar as Uncle Ted's big car raced up to the gate house, and stopped with a squeal of tires and brakes.

Mandy saw Elf and Harry exchange glances. They didn't approve. The warm glow she had felt all day began to ebb, as apprehension took its place. The sound the car made was an angry sound, and that meant that Uncle Ted was angry; and if Uncle Ted was angry, then her mother would be too.

Harry got up and went to the window. "They've gone inside," he said, "but I don't think we should take Mandy back just yet."

Elf looked up, and nodded. "They will come for her when they want her."

Mandy felt her spirits rise. "Is there time for cocoa?" she asked. The sound of shouting carried from the gate house through the open window.

"There certainly is," said Elf, as Harry shut the window, and turned on the radio.

In the morning, Mandy awoke to the sound of birds singing, and the smell of something baking. Buster was lying on the bed by her side. She lay looking at the pattern the sunlight made on the wall. She felt warm and safe.

Wishes were answered, she thought, despite what Suzie said. All evening she had wished that her mother would not come after her, and she had not. Maybe, if she kept wishing...

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Breakfast, in the sunny breakfast nook, was strawberries and cream and banana-nut muffins and tea. Mandy was allowed a small amount of tea diluted with a large amount of milk and some sugar. It tasted good.

Happily, she gazed at Elf and Harry, loving the way they looked — so kind and handsome — and how they smiled at her. It was just like her dreams.

But after breakfast the dream ended with a loud knock on the front door, which Harry answered. Mandy was seated on the sofa with Elf and Buster, where Elf had been reading to her from her book of poems and stories.

Mandy thought her mother looked terrible, all blotchy-faced and red-eyed, and her hair not combed. Mandy was embarrassed to have Elf and Harry see her that way.

A cigarette hung from the corner of Suzie's mouth, and her dressing gown didn't quite cover her soiled slip. She stood hip-shot in the doorway, peering into the dimness.

"Where's the kid?" she said.

Harry stood back to let her in. "She's right here. Come in."

Suzie exhaled a cloud of smoke. "I don't suppose you have a cup of coffee handy? Or better yet a shot of booze?"

"I'll make you a cup of coffee," said Harry. "Sit down." He left the room.

Mandy sat quietly, the book in her lap forgotten.

"You didn't come after her, so we put her to bed in the spare room," said Elf, his voice noncommittal.

"Yeah. Thanks. Ted and I had a row last night. When I got up, the bastard was gone! Took all his clothes and everything. Said he wasn't coming back. I don't know what the hell he expects me to do!"

"I'm sorry," said Elf, still in that same quiet voice. "The rent on the gate house is paid till the end of next month, if that is of any help."

Suzie crushed out the cigarette in an antique saucer. "Yeah, for what it's worth; but where in the hell am I supposed to go then? And how am I supposed to look for something else, stuck way out here in the tules. That son of a bitch!"

"Well, we'll be glad to do what we can to help. We've become very fond of Mandy, you know."

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Suzie gave him a cold look. "Yeah, I know, though I'm not sure why. She's one of the reasons that Ted left; he couldn't stand her always whining around underfoot."

Mandy felt her face grow hot with the injustice of it. She wasn't always whining, or underfoot, for that matter. She stayed out of way as much as she could.

At that moment Harry came back with the coffee. Suzie took the proffered cup greedily, without a thank you. Elf, Mandy, Buster, and Harry watched disapprovingly as she drank it.

Mandy was crying as she knocked at the cottage door. Her arm hurt, and her face, where the hairbrush had struck her, was hot and burning.

Clutching her book, she knocked again, filled with a sudden fear. What if they were not home?

But in a moment she heard Buster barking, and Harry opened the door. He sucked in his breath with a loud hiss when he saw her, and immediately reached down to lift her into his arms.

"You poor baby," he said, carrying her into the house. "What has she done to you?"

She began to cry. She couldn't help it. She laid her head against Harry's shoulder. "Suzie's sick," she said, through her tears. "She's on the floor, and she won't get up. She was drinking that stuff!

"Shhh. Hush, darling. It's all right."

Mandy's tears began to ebb, as she began to relax. She was so tired; it seemed as if she had not slept for days. Suzie had been acting crazy. It was that stuff, Mandy knew, that whiskey-stuff that did it. She had promised herself that when she grew up she would never touch it, never drink it. It made people crazy and bad, and she didn't want to be that way.

She heard Elf come into the room; heard his whispered question, but did not raise her head. She was safe now. Now she could sleep.

She heard dimly: "What's wrong? Is she all right?"

Harry's voice rumbled in his chest, beneath her own chest: "I think so. She seems to be worn out. The drunken bitch hit her in the face, Alf! This has got to stop."

"Well, put her down in the spare room."

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Movement: She felt herself laid down; covered; felt Buster jump up beside her — the warmth of his little body against her side.

"You look after her, Buster. I expect we'd better go up to the gate house and check on her mother."

"I guess we'd better."

The voices faded, and Mandy sank gratefully into sleep. During the night she floated now and then to near-wakefulness, there were sounds, like hammering, and voices; but in the safety of her warm nest, she barely noticed them, choosing instead to sink back down into the comfort of her dreams.

The morning was overcast, but Mandy didn't care. She was with Elf and Harry, and she knew that they would take care of her.

Buster was gone from her side, and she wanted to see him, and her friends, so she got out of bed, still dressed in her blue dress and underthings — the dress wasn't too clean, she saw — and her socks.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she padded out to the breakfast room, following the scent of something nice.

Elf and Harry were seated at the table. They smiled when they saw her, but she knew something was wrong.

Elf got up and lifted her into his arms. "Breakfast is almost ready; but I think you should have a good wash first, don't you?"

Mandy nodded. Her eyes felt sticky, and her head itched.

When she was in the funny tub with the lion feet, surrounded with bubbles, feeling all clean and shining, Elf sat down on the toilet seat, and cleared his throat.

"I have something to tell you, Mandy."

She nodded. She could tell from the way he spoke that it was something that he thought might upset her.

"Your mother seems to be gone. Harry and I went over to the gate house to check on her, and she wasn't there. It seems that she packed a suitcase and left. She must have caught a ride from a car on the highway."

He looked at her worriedly. "Now I don't want you to be upset. I know that you don't have other family, but Harry and I will look after you until your mother comes back. That's if you want to stay with us."

Mandy nodded, feeling an icy spot in her chest slowly begin to melt.

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She wasn't upset at all. She felt like smiling. "She's gone? And I can stay here, with you and Harry?"

Elf look relieved. "Yes, as long as you like."

Mandy let the smile out until she felt it cover her whole face. "And I can be your little girl?"

He hesitated for only a moment, then, "I don't see why not."

Mandy frowned as a cold sliver of worry penetrated her happiness. "But is she really gone? Really and truly?"

He spread his hands. "Get yourself dried off and dressed, and you can see for yourself. I'll be back in a minute."

As Mandy dressed, prodded by apprehension, she heard Elf's voice in the other room: "It's best that she sees for herself, Harry. I don't think it seems quite real to her yet. It's sad, but she's afraid that the woman is still here. We'll look around for a bit, then have breakfast."

Holding Elf's hand in a tight grip, she went into the gate house. The house was silent and cold, and it smelled bad. Mandy didn't want ever to see it again.

They went upstairs and down, through all the rooms, but her mother wasn't there. Still, Mandy's grip on Elf's hand did not loosen.

"But she could be in the garden," she said. And so they searched the garden, all the paths and nooks, and it was all the same as usual, all except for where the old well was; for Mandy now saw that it had a new cover, well fitted and strong, tightly locked. Elf's gaze followed hers. "I told you I would get that covered. Now you can play anywhere you like, and be safe."

Mandy's grip on Elf's hand loosened. Suddenly, she felt light with relief and happiness. Her stomach growled. "I'm hungry," she said.

Elf smiled, "So am I. Let's get back to the cottage." They turned back to the path, walking hand in hand, surrounded by flowers. It was a beautiful morning.

Mandy looked up at Elf. "After breakfast will you read to me?"

He nodded. "For a bit, then I must work for a while. What do you want me to read?"

"My favorite," she said. "You know."

"Of course," he said, and, smiling, began to recite: "There are fairies at the bottom of our garden! It's not so very, very far away..."

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE WIRED BIO-WORLD

INFORMATION is power. This isn't just the motto of the cyberfolk, from IBM to scruffy hackers — it's a fact of history.

A century ago, a whole commercial dynasty crashed, all because of information. For centuries, empires of commerce blossomed on a foundation of a dye, indigo. The shrubs which yield the basic ingredient ooze a colorless chemical, and quite ancient biotechnology, older than the time of Christ, converted it into a deep blue tincture. Tropical plantations churned out vast quantities of indigo, two million acres in India alone, for European textile factories.

Then German chemists decoded the chemical structure and synthesized indigo in the lab. Quickly they could make it from scratch in Hamburg. The entire tropical system surrounding indigo collapsed, bringing disaster for some, riches for others.

That drama went almost unnoticed by the futurists of the time, but it portends much. Already we routinely choose between artificial sweeteners and the real stuff, casual decisions upon which the fate of national economies turn, though we seldom think of it. (Cuba's economic misery comes from decades of state socialism and the declining sugar market, not the peripheral U.S. embargo.) The advanced nations replace imported fibers, flavorings, and oils with factory-made.

All this depends on filtered information interlaced with biological understanding. Does the convergence of biological and computer technology promise a radically different age? Quite possibly — though our own remaking of ourselves,

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converging with our artifacts, matters even more.

Walter Truett Anderson, a noted futurist, treats this in his insightful book, *Evolution Isn't What It Used to Be* (223 pages, Freeman, 1996, $23). He sees a growing bio-info complex wrapping itself around our planet, beginning with gene banks, satellite monitoring of ecosystems, "smart maps": a wired bio-world.

Our current focus on the Internet forgets that the next century's premier emergent technology will be biological. Policy mavens looking only at information density and flow are missing a crucial element, Anderson says — the "wrong problem problem."

Enzymes — the most important biotech of our era — already permeate many industrial processes. Unlike fossil fuels, they carry chemical programming which drives complex reactions, are renewable, and work at ordinary pressures and temperatures. But many biotech wonders to come will be surprises. Bell Labs dithered about even applying for a patent on the laser because they couldn't see how it had any relevance to telephones. Anderson feels that even the mavens driving the biotech industry do not see that there is no longer a clear boundary between burgeoning biotech and plain old-fashioned biology.

Our worldwide subzero seed banks, for example, might better be called seed morgues. Intended to save samples for later, higher tech uses, they cannot be recovered alive unless we better understand how to preserve them and regrow them by added artificial means.

Knowing this, conservationists prefer protecting genetic diversity in the field, and often oppose proposals to expand frozen sample banks, while they lose the battle to save forests and fields.

Yet either *in situ* or *ex situ* methods must falter and fail because they are still information-starved. We don't know enough, and cannot adeptly process what data we do have. No one knows how to balance these approaches without much more of an intuitive feel for the essentials behind the ill-defined term, "biodiversity."

Without much better handling of the rising tide of bio-info, we cannot possibly manage our world. Anderson neatly extracts the principal lessons policy mavens must grasp to do this.

First, all information — defined as facts organized until they have relevance and purpose — is incom-

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plete. Hoping that more data will resolve an issue and force a decision is just wrong. This is inevitable because information always widens the range of choices, rather than narrowing them.

Worse, bio-info won't be enough. It must be ramified into knowledge (information internalized, integrated) and brewed into wisdom (knowledge made super-useful by theory).

Finally, we should recognize that most people aren't policy wonks, and won't see the world as the info-suppliers do. Public controversies frequently pit people talking statistics against those talking myth. The "rationalists with their hard disks full of economic or scientific information bump against invocations of Frankenstein and Gaia."

Once created, and contrary to conspiracy theorists, information both leaks and cannot be called back. Use of antibiotics quickly became global, and their ready use now has accelerated evolution of resistant strains — a foreseeable backlash, in retrospect.

Such ordinary augmentations we are used to, and those coming — vaccines against male baldness, say, or tooth decay — seem to promise easy rewards. This century has been the blithe, honeymoon period between biotech and humanity, with benefits far outweighing hazards.

The old treatment modes — preventive, palliative, and curative — now give way to a powerful fourth: substitutive.

I have an artificial left shoulder, wired back together after a softball accident. It hurts sometimes, as intermediate technology often is only a partial solution. My eye-helpers are near-perfect though, having been around since the invention of "spectacles."

Soon I may need a pacemaker, or even some of the odder additions people accept: artificial sphincters, intimate prostheses, cochlear implants to restore hearing. Mechanical, they seem as natural to us now as eyeglasses and tooth fillings.

Anderson predicts that the next major augmentation will probably be a wholly "new chapter in the history of animal husbandry — and indeed in the history of life on Earth — because there has never been an animal able to exchange entire organs with those of other species." This might seem like an incremental version of the horrors H.G. Wells depicted in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, but the reality is more tame.

New anti-rejection drugs and better surgery have spurred the sur-

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vival of human-human transplants over the last five years, cutting costs nearly in half, so that a kidney transplant now costs $50,000, and a liver $200,000. But with transplant numbers rising at rates of fifty percent in six years, donors are scarce. If Larry Niven's late-1960s vision of "organleggers" is not to come true, technology has to come to the rescue.

Pigs have organs the right size for humans, and such "transgenic" animals will be used instead, possibly this year. Genetically engineered with human proteins to cloak offending pig molecules, pig organs will fend off our defenses, reducing the rejection problems. The key development is information at the molecular level.

Predictably, animal rights advocates oppose this approach. Yet transgenic transplants confronts these views with an uncomfortably clear issue. Plainly, people will die immediately without them, as they do now.

This is unlike diseases such as AIDS (which conventional wisdom says we haven't done enough research for); these impose a heavy toll on lab animals in pursuit of a future cure. Transgenics presents us with concrete either/or decisions, right now. As our command of bio-info increases, such choices will get more stark, and rancor will rise.

"Precision farming" will be another outcome of bio-info's web. Satellite data will tell a farmer how much fertilizer to disperse in real time, conveyed to him on his tractor (well padded, air conditioned, computerized, cellular to the max). Back in the barn, "geneware" installed in cows can yield medicinal milk, rich in proteins like insulin which we now must laboriously manufacture.

Even the usual farm waste such as corn husks and stalks, straw, wood chips and pulp may be used as a base to brew up food directly, using suitably engineered "smart bacteria." Such tight networks can perhaps leapfrog the heavy-chemical, heavy-machinery phase of agriculture to a smart-farming mode.

This savvy farmer is most needed in the undeveloped world, where the great population crush of the next century will arise. Common liberal orthodoxy that living close to the land leads to eco-awareness is historically naive, considering that Mesopotamia, northern Africa and the Mayan civilization were ruined by people who had lived there quite a long while.

Rather than invoke such fantasies, and the parallel image of a

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pristine, steady-state nature, genuine progressive thinking should embrace chaos theory. Naive, old-style "bioregionalism" which tries to get us all to settle down and be virtuous ignores that nature alters on all time scales, hovering in states bordering on instability.

Nature can't be restored to its immaculate historic state because it is ever-changing, even without us. Any reclaiming we do installs a kind of virtual nature, not a mythical absolute state. This sobering fact at least consoles us for our meddlesome temper: "no matter how much we liked *Pocahontas*, we really don't know how to leave nature alone."

Even precision farming may prove only a momentary improvement. People in the Judean hills at the north end of the Dead Sea apparently invented farming, driven by hunger around ten thousand years ago. They had the right seeds and a social organization that made setting up in a sedentary style possible.

This greatest of inventions (it gave us civilization, after all) we have amplified into agribusiness, which regularly doles out fresh wonders like the Flavr Savr tomato. To come may well be decaf coffee from decaf coffee plants, with no processing necessary in between. All this we have done in a few recent centuries.

The price is the end of subsistence farming as a livelihood. The next victim may be the farm itself. Possibly, the entire method of tissue culture can be amplified to yield large-scale crops.

Take a slice from a grape vine, immerse it in a solution of nutrients and hormones, and grow the vine itself — or perhaps only the grapes, since that's what you want. Instead of a citrus tree, cultivate in glass the juice vesicles of lemons, say, in a growth medium rich in just those chemicals which instruct the cells to develop into juice sacs.

So far this technology shows citrus farmers the effects of pollutants and nutrients in speedy, well-controlled experiments. But there is no reason such methods cannot expand into food factories.

Suppose we envision farms which produce feedstock crops of trees or bushes. These will be rugged and need less water than the more delicate trees in orange groves, which we must protect against frosts and insects. You could let these shrubs grow until needed, free of seasonal harvesting. Even lesser forms, such as wood chips and grass, could be useful.

This is because a food factory

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needs mostly lignocellulose, rugged chains of glucose molecules. We cannot digest this, but it is the raw material of our food. Methods of processing it into simple sugar syrups exist. With the right techniques, such chains would be the missing link between the raw power of the sun, which drives everything, and an orange juice factory down the street.

Sugar syrups can be moved and used a lot easier than harvested crops. Instead of hauling heavy harvests from the countryside to cities (where more and more of us live), ship the syrups to factories sitting next to the consumers.

This would make food production demand-driven, so that the surge in need in the fast-growing cities of the tropical nations could be met by food production in the cities themselves.

Of course, such grub might not taste as good to us. Hungry people are less fastidious, and the issue may be settled by necessity rather than taste.

Already tissue culture is used to manufacture vanilla extract. It equals in quality and savor that gotten from the vanilla orchid, which grows in only a few tropical regions such as Madagascar. It is better than the synthetic vanilla most of us eat, seldom realizing that it isn't the real thing. Increasingly, our lives have artificial elements which we accept without thinking. This will be more true when biology becomes more subtle, and as it changes us, as well.

Anderson sees human destiny coming out of three information systems: the usual genetic and cultural, plus the emerging *exosomatic* — information gathered beyond our bodies, but linked firmly to us, like the bio-info gathered globally. Each of these three "lineages" advances our evolution, the exosomatic rate now accelerating beyond view.

Where should we let it drive us? No moral anchors here seem trusty. Invoking Nature with its implied supremacy ignores that many cultures have fundamentally differing ideas of even what Nature is, much less how it should work.

Other cultural guidelines — religious doctrine, scientific objectivity, fashion — are similarly mutable, necessary perhaps but not sufficient as guides. The "blessing and scourge of our time" is the dizzying multitude of our options. And mere cultural relativism won't work; cultures must clash when the questions are greater than regional.

Who will win, in this future? Wrenching perspectives beckon:

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perhaps the quick, easy info-flow means that biotech won't operate by the old rules of resource scarcity. What happens to patent rights in this brave new whirl? Should better seeds be immediately distributed to the tropics, say, without worrying about paying their development costs? Who decides?

Or will info-savvy groups, as Anderson fears, "skip merrily onward into the bio-information society while the unenlightened masses remain mired in polluted and overcrowded misery"? The traditional Right frets over harm to commerce while the Left worries over damage to cultural and social structures. Some think "information wants to be free" and others fear the gusher will swamp frail Third World institutions, leaving them naked in a storm of change.

An insightful case is the potential super-drug, interleukin-12. If it proves effective against Third World scourges, pressures to develop and deliver it to the World Health Organization will mount. International agencies will probably give it away, providing little return revenue stream to the company that developed it. So who will?

A deeper issue is how we should value the needs of future generations, as exalted in the sustainable-development model, against the wealth and welfare of those living now. It is easy to raise the question but answers come hard. Some like Kevin Kelley in *Out of Control* take refuge in the moral free market of self-organization. Overall governance then must arise from humble, interdependent acts done locally in parallel. When nobody's really in charge, nobody's to blame. This means rely heavily on a "natural" process which, alas, may also just be mob rule. Dispersed decision-making can still err badly.

For Anderson this calls to mind an "information standard" like the old gold standard. Bytes then replace the state-centered visions of the last few centuries, skirting the world-centered visions of the one-worlders, ending with a multi-centric model, a "polyarchy."

Within this interactive soup will float the dreadnoughts of old-fashioned voices like the Roman Catholic Church, autocrats, multinationals, wealthy hackers, and media moguls. Meanwhile, the pot stirs and bubbles, fed by media circuses which fixate upon "contests, conquests and coronations" more than the lofty imperial views of usual ruling elites.

It is often simpler to get some grip on the broad view, usually ex-

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pressed in the glossy generalizations of the futurist. This leaves us long on rhetoric, short on specific visions, preferring the far horizons.

I saw plenty of early indicators when I was at MIT on sabbatical leave. In their Media Lab the notion of a "body net," with people meshed thoroughly with their computers, is being worked out.

I got a feel for how this might evolve several years ago at an MIT lunch, along with Marvin Minsky of artificial intelligence fame, some acolytes, and especially a young man wearing a heavy set of glasses.

His left eye sported a see-through computer screen. After looking through his glasses a few minutes I could navigate through the restaurant while calling up data into my left eye, using a touch pad in my left hand. The type floated in air close to my far-vision focus, so I could read it and go back to conversation with slight effort. I could access data, answer e-mail, or take notes while talking or walking — paradise for Type A personalities.

Of course it was bulky and awkward, attracting stares from passers-by. The eyes adjust to it, so that you really can walk down a street and read at the same time. But improvements will come if market forces drive them.

I can imagine more compact, lighter such glasses. The more interesting changes will probably come from completely unexpected changes, perhaps a method of writing directly on the cornea in a display that fades within seconds, unless you instruct it otherwise.

Will such augmentations be more than odd gadgets? Divining the future doesn't demand that we guess accurately, but Anderson's case — that biology and data will drive change more profoundly than any other agency afoot in our time — seems sound.

The indigo metaphor promises unsettling change, to be sure — but we still have indigo. The bio-info world will be more tightly coupled, organized in layers we seldom sense, but most important, it will be *bigger*, with all the old possibilities still around. Our landscape will stretch, and we with it.

Answers will come slowly. We will have to learn our way, sometimes painfully, through the experience. I doubt that anything can stop it.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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One of my great joys, as an editor, is the freedom that the October/November issue gives me. Because I have extra pages, I can publish longer stories. I believe the perfect length for a well-developed sf story is the novella. In a novella, the author can take a concept and explore it fully, without the complications needed at novel length.

Few writers have the ability — and the courage — to tackle sf at this length. Carolyn Ives Gilman has written some of our best sf novellas, from "The Wild Ships of Fairny" to "The Honeycrafters." She outdoes herself with this month's cover story, "Candle in a Bottle."

Candle in a Bottle

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

THE STORM HIT JUST AS THE two travelers were coming to the summit of L'Arc du Sol Pass. All morning the sun had been bright at their backs as they had climbed through pine-covered slopes. When the trail rose above the tree line, they should have been able to see the whole Vaudry Range spread before them, the granite palisades of Mont Chatoyer to the west. Instead, there was only a blinding wall of snow, a visible white noise driven by a reckless wind.

Dominique trudged along in the path Gabriel was breaking. Ahead, his brother was only a snow-caked capote with a nylon pack, and shaggy sheepskin boots grown enormous with iceballs. He called ahead, "Hey, Gabe, is this what you meant by 'It'll be fun'?"

Gabriel looked back with a tense frown. His dark hair was plastered down with wet, and the mesh skullcap of his headnet glistened with drops. He said, "Keep your mind on the trail, Nika."

It had been Gabriel's idea to cut across the mountains on foot instead of taking the sane way around by road. It would have taken at least a week,

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and more money than Gabriel wanted to spend, to go by public transport. He had argued, "It's only three days to the Institut Sorel by foot, if we cut across the pass. Come on, Nika, you're the experiential one; it's your chance to have a real flesh adventure. It'll be fun."

At the time Dominique had rolled his eyes, knowing what kind of fun you could get into on mountain trails so close to winter. But a glance from their mother had told him he had to go. It didn't matter that he was the younger brother; he had always been the one who had to watch out for Gabriel. And Gabriel was in such a mood that he would risk his life hazarding the pass alone rather than give up.

Gabriel had had all summer to make up his mind to go, but he had frittered away the months, indecision alternating with bitter dissatisfaction. He was the nethead in the family, smart and ambitious to do more than work in his mother's shop. But the lack of any obvious alternative had kept him at home, wasting the days in political telecaucuses with others as malcontent as he, his irritation growing till his family had all begged him to do something, anything. Finally, when it was already too late in the season, so that failure was almost inevitable, he had decided to consult the Oracle at the Institut Sorel.

The trail was going down now, writhing to and fro like a thing tormented. Dominique thought he could glimpse a shadow of trees ahead — a good sign. As they came to the last exposed switchback, Gabriel stopped in his tracks and began fiddling with the recorder under his coat. "I've got to change spools," he said.

Dominique stood and waited. Gabriel was recording this whole trek, though the resolution of his equipment would stink. At least a headnet couldn't record the cold or wet; that might improve things. But Dominique still couldn't imagine who would want to experience a mountain hike through Gabriel's eyes. He missed so much.

In the willful way of mountain weather, a shaft of sunlight lit the slope ahead. The view momentarily cleared. Below them lay a circular valley with a single outcrop of rock rising at its center. Upon that lone spire were the buildings of the Institut, like natural outgrowths of the rock itself.

"Gabriel, look!" Dominique said.

"Just a second," Gabriel said, fumbling with the recorder.

"It's Sorel!" Dominique said.

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The sunlight faded, leaving the scene gray and ominous. Gabriel finally looked up, his hair running in rivulets down his high forehead. "That's Sorel!" he said, as if his brother wouldn't know. Dominique realized he was speaking to the recorder. "You're looking at the center of the intellectual universe, Dominique. That's the place where the true spirit of Renaissance Dernier learning is kept alive."

The clouds closed in again. Dominique tried to shake some of the snow from his boots and pack. He felt like a walking glacier. "I hope they have hot baths."

Gabriel didn't dignify this with an answer. He turned to the trail again at a pace so fast Dominique nearly had to jog to keep up.

Dominique had never shared his brother's restless, searching nature. Because he was big, muscular, and easygoing, everyone had expected him to excel in sports or a physical profession. But all he had ever wanted to do was work in his mother's shop where the finest seismic monitors in the world were made, piecing together photonic components under the microscope with his blunt, dexterous fingers.

It was almost dark by the time they reached the valley and struck out across featureless farmland. Here, in open fields, the storm truly surrounded them. Right, left, above, and below blended into a limitless chaos of white — no boundaries, no differentiation to make sense of what they saw. Dominique trudged along, sure only of one direction, *down.*

They struck a road just outside the village of Sous-Sorel. Soon the glow of streetlights cut through the disordered night. As they slogged through knee-deep snow down the deserted main street fantasies, of dry clothes and a hot sauna filled Dominique's mind.

In better weather, the shops along the main street catered to the droves of pilgrims who flocked to consult the Oracle about their futures. Now the streetlights, veiled in haloes of snow, shone only on closed doors and curtained windows. Gabriel stopped, his eye caught by the single lit window on the street.

"Look, a bookstore," he said.

"Just what I wanted," Dominique groaned.

"They'll have free coffee. All bookstores do."

They entered along with a gust of snowy wind. There was no one in sight, so they dumped their packs by the door and went looking for the

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coffee, leaving white footprints on the carpet. When Dominique found the samovar, he poured two steaming cups.

Gabriel was wrinkling his nose at the racks of pastel-covered sample books around them. "Inspirational garbage," he said. "You'd think that here..."

"Pilgrims?" said a sardonic voice. In the doorway to a back room stood a stooped man with thin, graying hair and an expression as sharp as the icicles on his eaves. He had a headnet on, and eyephones pushed up on his forehead; clearly they had interrupted him in the midst of study.

"We're not pilgrims," Gabriel said just as Dominique was about to answer that they were. "We're here to visit the Institut."

"Ah. Traveling scholars," the man said with a skeptical lift of one eyebrow that meant he saw through them.

Gabriel took a gulp of coffee and said, "Don't you have any better books than this?"

"Oh, this is just the souvenir section," the man said wryly, handling a sample with a sunrise and flowers on the cover. "The real stuff is in the back. What are you interested in?"

"Everything," Gabriel said. "Complexity theory, noetic architecture, metadynamics, that sort of thing."

"That should narrow it down to a few million works. The recent classics are in the disk racks on the right wall. If you don't see what you want, tell the catalog. It'll suggest some titles. I can print up anything in about five minutes. Most of those works only come on spool or disk."

Gabriel disappeared into the back. The bookseller came forward to help himself to some coffee. "And what about you? What's your field of study?"

"Oh, I don't read," Dominique said.

The man blew on his coffee. "Ah. Not one of the 'truly conscious,' as they would say up on the mountain. The savants can afford to be snobs; they don't have to live in the real world where the literate are the oddities."

"There's no point in learning to read, unless you want to become a savant," Dominique said.

"And even then it can be a curse."

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Dominique had often thought so, but had never been tactless enough to say it aloud, especially in front of Gabriel. All the literate people he knew thought too much about themselves, always analyzing some inner person that others could never get to know. It made them seem hidden and secretive. In comparison, even women were easy to understand.

Gabriel came out again, looking overwhelmed.

"Too many choices?" the bookseller said.

"Oh no," Gabriel said hastily. "I suppose I could get all these in the Neige Valley, too, if only my mother's sysop weren't such a neanderthal."

The bookseller eyed him. "Which polity?"

"Allnet." Gabriel complained about it at least once a day, at home. Allnet was technical and business-focused, and had few of the subjects Gabriel wanted. "If I had any money I'd join Redpath. Actually, I've been on it already — day memberships from a friend."

"I may have met you then," the bookseller said. "What's your handle?"

"Really? You're a Redpath?" Gabriel looked at the man with new interest. "Did you vote in the last election, when Gröder got in? I would have voted for her."

"Don't tell them that on the mountain. They think we're all revolutionaries polluting the data stream."

"Do they give you any trouble?"

The bookseller gave a contemptuous laugh. "You talk as if they ever set foot down here. Everything they do is by DI remote. Virtual geology, virtual sociology. Why, if they left the Institut they might have to look at something that doesn't fit the models. Like rocks or people."

In a disgruntled voice Gabriel said, "And they won't even let us have haptic interface technology."

"They've got better than that at Sorel. They've got DIs that transmit emotion."

"No!"

"Yes."

"I thought emotions were too complex."

"Well, it takes masses of processing power. More than you or I could afford."

"I suppose rational thought will be next."

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Dominique's attention had begun to wander. He heard this kind of discussion all the time from Gabriel and his friends at home, and he found it hard to distinguish the real information from the posturing and rhetoric. He stamped his feet to get the melting snow off.

"I think we're boring your illiterate friend," the bookseller said.

Gabriel flushed angrily; he never let his friends belittle Dominique. "Dominique's got a DI operator's license," he said sharply.

For a moment Dominique saw a flash of envy in the bookseller's eyes. It quickly disappeared behind an affectation of cynicism. "That fits the pattern. I dare say they don't let you have one," he said to Gabriel.

That hit too close to home. Wounded by the reminder, Gabriel said, "We'd better get going, Nika."

"Give my regards to the font of knowledge," the bookseller said.

They shouldered their packs and stepped out into the wind. They had been indoors just long enough to get sweaty and wet under their coats; the air felt twice as chilling.

"What a snob," Gabriel said as they headed down the street. "You'd think a Redpath would feel more solidarity with regular people."

Ahead was a large hotel, built to accommodate the summer crowds. "I suppose we'll be the only ones there," Dominique said.

"We're not stopping here," Gabriel said. His eyes were fixed tenaciously on the rock cliff at the end of the road.

"Oh, Gabriel!" Dominique groaned. "It can wait till morning. The Oracle isn't going away."

"I didn't bring enough money for a hotel," Gabriel said stiffly.

Dominique stopped in the road with the snow collecting on his eyebrows. Gabriel was supposed to be paying for all of this. "Then where are we going to stay? How are we going to buy a transport pass to get back?"

"I'm not going back," Gabriel said.

At last everything fell into place. Gabriel hadn't come to consult the Oracle at all. He had come in hopes of being selected as an acolyte at the Institut. What his radical friends didn't know was that Gabriel's disaffection was all personal, not political. He would give up all the ideology in the world to become a savant.

"You're crazy, Gabriel!" Dominique said. "They don't take people your age for acolytes. You would have to be trained from childhood to be a savant."

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"I've trained myself," Gabriel said. "I've read, I've studied. All I've ever wanted is access to more information. I can do it."

"They won't care about that. People all over the world compete to get into the Institut Sorel. They only take the best."

Gabriel's voice was tense and high. "I'll make them measure my noetic potential. They'll see."

There was no arguing with him when his voice sounded like that. If Dominique persisted, it would only be harder for Gabriel to back down. Dominique tried to stifle his frustration. "Did you bring enough money for *me* to get back?"

"Call Mother for some credit," Gabriel said impatiently. He shifted his pack. "I'm going on up."

Dominique stood and watched his brother labor on down the buried street, his empty footsteps following. Gabriel hadn't brought enough money because he wanted to twist the arm of fate, to eliminate all other possibilities. But fate didn't work that way. As usual, Gabriel had set himself up for failure.

Gradually, Dominique's vexation faded. With a resigned certainty, he knew what was going to happen. Tomorrow morning Gabriel was going to come trudging back down that road from the Institut rejected, his grandiose hopes in tatters. Then he would need someone friendly by him. Dominique couldn't leave his brother to face such a bruising alone.

When he caught up, Gabriel gave him a swift glance. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see the Oracle, too," Dominique lied.

Gabriel was too preoccupied to see through him.

The lights of the village ended where the black cliff began. Up the rock face a steep winding road ran, carved into the outcrop itself. Above the height of the village roofs the wind had scoured the road clean of snow. As he climbed, Dominique hugged the rock face, for the wind tugged as if to throw him off like a snowflake into the swirling void. Gabriel seemed energized by the proximity of his goal; he pushed on fast. His flashlight beam bobbed up the road ahead.

The road passed between two outcroppings of weathered rock and into an open courtyard. Only when he saw the windows did Dominique realize that he was surrounded not by the natural mountain, but by the buildings of the Institut. There was not a simple Euclidean shape in all the

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structures around him. No wall rose straight without fracturing into a thousand angles before it reached the roof. One artfully eroded spire was topped by antennas and a satellite dish. In a window high above, a single candle burned.

"Why would they use candles here, where they have all the most advanced technology in the world?" Dominique said.

"It must be symbolic; everything here is," Gabriel explained in a tense undertone. "It probably means they choose not to use all the technology they have. They are too wise to be ruled by machines, as pre-Renaissance people were."

Before them stood a shadowed, irregular arch where a towering door kept out the night.

"You'll have to have a question to get in," Gabriel said.

"What sort of question?"

"They only admit those who can puzzle the wise."

"I couldn't puzzle anyone here if I tried," Dominique said.

"Well, you'll have to, or wait outside all night."

There was no knob or catch, and they searched in vain for a bell or knocker. Frustrated, Gabriel finally shouted out, "Hello! Anyone there?" His voice echoed in the courtyard and died.

Dominique stamped his feet to remind them who was in charge. His breath blurred the air in front of him. At last a nearby shutter clattered open and an acolyte peered out. She wore a headnet on her shaved skull, with lowered eyephones that gave her a blank, inscrutable expression.

"You are being obvious," she said.

Gabriel whispered to Dominique, "Let me do the talking." Raising his voice, he said, "We've come to consult the Oracle."

"Are you riddles? Do you make the night wise?"

"We came all the way from the Neige Valley on foot. We nearly lost our way in the blizzard. You can't turn us back."

The acolyte looked into space, like someone watching a virtual scene. "Pilgrims," she said indifferently. "They say they walked here."

She listened a moment, then turned back. "What question will you give us?"

"You're no savant," Gabriel said. "Why should I tell you?"

Dominique stared at his brother, startled by his impudence. But the

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girl only shrugged and backed away from the window; a gray-haired woman in a high-collared saffron dhoura looked out. Her eyes were also masked behind the headnet visor. "Very well, puzzle me," she said.

Gabriel drew a tense breath, then said distinctly, "How close is the possible sphere?"

The savant laughed. "That's obvious. It's as close as your ear. Try again."

Gabriel licked his lips, disconcerted. He had obviously expected that one to work. But he had another ready. "Is it right to indict the mild mirage?"

This time the savant was silent, considering thoughtfully. At last she said, "That will be currency enough." She turned to Dominique. "And you?"

"Think of something," Gabriel hissed.

Apparently, they wanted gibberish. He had to pluck some disconnected words from his brain, and wire them into a sentence. He stammered out, "Why does the secret candle cry?"

The savant frowned. "Are you sure it does?"

Dominique said, "You're being obvious."

The savant was silent for a very long time. At last she sighed and said, "Very well."

Dominique almost laughed. It was easier than he had thought to puzzle the wise.

Before them, an irregular crack split the massive door down the middle and the two sides fell back into the wall. Automatic lights came on in the room beyond. Gabriel and Dominique stepped through, into the Institut Sorel.

FROM THE WINDOWS of her chamber, the Voice of the Rinpoche of Sorel sometimes looked out on the sea, sometimes on the broad avenues of Paris or Abouta, or on the many other places the Institut monitored. Tonight the windows showed only the Vaudry Range, veiled by snow and night. The Voice sat cross-legged on her mat, her fingers in the jnana mudra, the headnet covering her skull.

In ages past, her ancestors had been Brahmins, statesmen and schol-

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ars; but she had shed all class and ethnicity in twenty-five years at Sorel. Her straight black hair was bobbed at the level of her jaw; she had not combed it in three days. Her eyes were darker than normal, puffy with grief.

As she stilled her concentration, the headnet wakened to the signal of alpha waves. The energies of the discontinuous interface focused on her optic nerve, and a vision floated before her.

It was a visual metaphor of human civilization. It looked much like a landscape, which it was — the fitness landscape within which culture could continue to evolve and prosper. There was a plain on one side, a range of mountains on the other: Oracle's heuristic representation of the stable and chaotic states. A path snaked along the edge of the mountain range, sometimes forking, sometimes whole. Branches that dipped too far into the rough topology of chaos usually disappeared or looped back into the changeless plain of stability. With a finger the Voice traced the middle course, the one that balanced just on the edge, in the terrain of complexity. In that narrow ribbon lay the path of maximum fitness, where extinction events and leaps of adaptation were part of the mathematics of existence.

The Voice focused on the edge of the graph, where the landscape ended in a blank cliff. As she swooped lower with a speed that would have given anyone else vertigo, the seeming simplicity of the model dissolved. The path of civilization parted into a myriad of intertwined threads over a rugged hodgepodge of hills and craters. She focused on one of the threads till it, too, resolved into an intricate, twining rope of variants wound around a central strand. That strand represented the cultural matrix where Sorel lay. If she had gone down in scale by more orders of magnitude, she could have resolved the graph to the very level of individual savants' work. Few places on earth were scrutinized as closely as Sorel.

At the edge of the chasm where the data ended, she commanded Oracle to construct a hypothetical future. Gray hills and valleys appeared where all had been blank, and Sorel's path snaked forward, then veered sharply into the domain of chaos. Frowning, the Rinpoche's Voice ordered the assumptions changed, and a new landscape built itself. This time the Institut's line careened off into the plain.

She opened her eyes and the display disappeared. She rose from her mat and went to the window where the blustery snow traced wild paths

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on the air. The courtyard and Institut buildings looked solid and stable in comparison. It was an illusion, of course: rock was merely a snowstorm on another scale.

Oracle had been showing omens of instability for months now. She had seen it in other cultural lines, but none had ever given her such unease. This time, change would affect Sorel; and as Sorel went so went a good part of human civilization.

"Naidu?"

The uncertain footsteps, the wavering voice, made her close her eyes for a moment, wishing the present away. When she turned, the old man was standing in the doorway.

"Go back to bed, Rinpoche," she said. "You should be asleep."

"Why? What time is it?" he said, rubbing his forehead anxiously.

His obsession with time was a new aspect of his growing dementia. As memory left him, so did the capacity to judge the passage of time. The gridwork of sequence had collapsed upon him, making all events equally near, equally far. Though he could not say so, it clearly terrified him. He slept with a watch clutched in his hand.

Naidu crossed the darkened room. His watery eyes fastened on her headnet and he said, "Is that mine?"

"No, cheri, it's mine," she said.

"Where is my DI? There's something I need you to do."

"I'll do it tomorrow. There will be time."

They had had to take his equipment away. The last few times he had tried to operate her had been too agonizing. She had had to share his wandering thoughts, his confusion, his childlike rage. It had been so unlike the Rinpoche she had served, and loved, for fifteen years. As his Voice, she had known his deep reasoning, his unfailing moral core, from the inside. His mind had been one of immense clarity, honed by a lifetime of training, perfectly suited to lead Sorel. They had compared him to Aquinas and Bourassa. She had been his eyes on the outside world, and had thus collaborated in the masterwork of his leadership.

"I shall become an organism once again, and know life uncontaminated by mind," he had said in a lucid moment when it first became clear that the usual cures were not going to work on him, that there was still something about the human mind that even Sorel didn't know.

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He still looked like that person, though somehow slacker, less animate. She knew she ought to love this body, this organism, for the man who had once inhabited it, but all she could feel was disgust at it for having betrayed him.

He fussed a little about going back to bed, but she finally got him to lie down, and switched on the hypnotic display they had installed on his ceiling to keep him calm. When she returned to the outer chamber, the snowstorm had intensified; ice crystals ticked against the windowpanes. The room felt cold.

Very few people in Sorel, and no one outside, knew of the Rinpoche's condition. They were training another Rinpoche, but he was only seven years old. In the meantime, they could only guess at what their beloved leader would have done. In all of Sorel's history, there had never been a worse time for the crisis Oracle was predicting.

The few savants who knew the situation would often say to her, "You knew his mind better than anyone; you shared it. You must know what he would do." And gradually, from telling them her best guesses, she had grown in their eyes — she, a mere parlant, no more than a body trained to house another's mind. She knew nothing of leadership, yet now learned people deferred to her. She would have traded it all away to feel his firm mind guiding her.

She closed her eyes again, and the graph appeared in the air. This time she gave the Rinpoche's private access code, and called up the detail of the Institut's inner workings. She searched for instabilities, straining the graph's strands one by one. The savants all thought the imbalance was societal, but she could not shake the feeling that the crisis would come from within.

That did not simplify the problem. Sorel was a society in itself, complex with history. It was the oldest of the great institutes founded at the beginning of the third millennium. In that era, the mechanistic sciences that had briefly seduced humanity with their technological prowess had dissolved into conflicting sects, all claiming to have the true key to reality. The old sciences, blinded by their materialism, counted as "real" only what could be detected or measured, which limited reality to matter, energy, space, and time. Pattern was merely a property of these. But in the Renaissance Dernier scholars discovered the crucial nonmate-

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rial constituent — information. Soon matter, energy, space, and time were seen as mere properties of information.

No longer would researchers spend their efforts dissecting things to learn how they ran; instead, they would compute the governing algorithms that gave all things their shape and structure. They would leave the material and delve into the real.

For centuries, Sorel had been the world center of information mechanics. In these irregular buildings, savants had mapped the mathematics of epidemics and rumor propagation. They had unlocked the metadynamics of economies and population growth, and the fitness landscapes of nation-states. As the principles of social ecology emerged, humankind could finally hope to graph its way to a world without eruptions of disorder like poverty, crime, or war. Even now, after centuries, civilization was still (as the mathematics said it must be) a balancing act — but because of Sorel it was no longer a blind blunder.

The Rinpoche's Voice sighed and cut off the display, gazing out into the snowy courtyard. The Rinpoche had loved Sorel, and for him she loved it, too. She hoped she would not live to see it threatened.

THE ROOM THE TWO PILGRIMS entered was the most distracting space Dominique had ever seen. The red glowing ceiling was not a surface, but an intricately coved and recoved three-dimensional fractal. In places you could see deep into the recesses of the pattern, where the color became profound as wine; in others, the self-repeating cavities devolved quickly into the texture of sponge. Connecting ceiling to floor was a forest of glowing cords, of every dimension from microfilament to thick optical cable. Their colors changed in waves, beckoning the visitors forward.

The savant from the window was standing beyond the forest of light-fibers, her eyeshades blank as eggs. As the two pilgrims came up, she said, "Our building is an allegory. Acolytes contemplate it for many years until they discover the principles it signifies."

She paused. Unfathomable thoughts seemed to populate the silence. "I cannot promise that Oracle can answer your questions. But in every situation, unpredictability exists. Come with me."

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Beyond the first room, the floor fell away and they found themselves threading single file across a transparent bridge above an upside-down room. Somehow, the curtains hung erect below them. Candles burned in sconces, their flames rising serenely downward. For a dizzying moment Dominique had the feeling that he was the one reversed, and wanted to turn his head around. Gabriel pushed him on.

On the other side they came to an octagonal room with doors in each wall. In the center was an eight-sided settee with all seats facing outward. The savant said, "You may wait here. I will seek the voyant."

Nervously, Gabriel asked, "Will it be Voyant Raspail?"

The savant's face was uncommunicative. "She is the only voyant we have."

She stepped into a framed painting, and disappeared.

Dominique threw himself down on the settee, but Gabriel paced nervously.

"Voyant Raspail!" he said, his voice hushed as if someone might be listening. "Dominique, do you know what that means?"

"What?"

"She is the greatest voyant who has ever lived. In the last few years there has been a series of amazing discoveries out of Sorel. I can't explain them; it's too complicated. But they say there is another great paradigm shift coming, a breakthrough in our understanding of the world. And it's all due to Raspail."

"And she will tell our fortunes?" Dominique asked.

"Oh don't be such an idiot!" Gabriel exclaimed. "The Oracle will give us an extremely sophisticated aptitude test. We'll find out what we're good for."

"I know what I'm good for."

"Well, I don't."

They waited in silence for a long time. The air was still chill; Dominique noticed that the snow on his pack had not melted. At last the savant emerged from one of the doors.

"Oracle is ready for you," she said. "Which of you wishes to go first?"

"Me," Gabriel nearly shouted. "Me," he said again, in a controlled voice.

The savant gestured him through the door.

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Alone, Dominique paced, trying to warm up. At last, curious, he opened one of the doors. Beyond was a long hallway lined with doors. Simultaneously, dozens of Dominiques opened the doors all down the hall and stared back at him. He hastily closed it again.

Presently the savant came out from yet another door. "We are ready for you," she said.

"I don't really need this, if it's any trouble," he said.

She stared at him in such a way that he meekly went where she pointed.

The room beyond was completely dark. When he stepped forward, the touch of his foot set off a reaction in the floor, and azure galaxies swirled away from his glowing footprint. By its light he saw that he was at the base of a spiral ramp. He followed the ramp up, treading on sparks and hurricanes. At the apex a chair stood, reflected in the polished floor as if floating in still water. Dropping his pack, he gingerly sat down.

The light faded. He turned around and saw, hanging in the air behind him, a bubble of distortion, like a spherical heat wave. It could only be one thing: a discontinuous interface like the ones the headnets created to feed information directly to the optic nerve. But those ones were microscopic; this was big enough to encompass an entire brain.

It moved slowly toward him. He drew away, unnerved.

"Sit back, please," a voice said.

Reluctantly, he turned around and settled back against the headrest, clutching the chair arms. Thousands of people had done this without any harm.

Merging with the DI bubble was like passing the surface of a lake. Lights traced fireworks across his vision — at first senseless, then resolving into a pattern of fishes sporting in a rainbow sea. He watched, intrigued, then realized he was beginning to see a hidden, three-dimensional image. As he gazed into it, he found himself standing inside a massive cathedral dome with sunlight pouring through a window in the ceiling; yet the sporting fishes were still there. As he moved he brushed something and realized there was another image hidden under this one — a tactile image. He raised his hands to feel it, but then the vision ceased.

When he returned to the waiting room, Gabriel was sitting on the settee, chin on his fists. Dominique sat down beside him. "It was beautiful," he said.

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"What was?"

"The Oracle. Didn't you think so?"

"All I saw was some lights."

They waited in silence.

The savant stood before them. "Gabriel," she said, though they had never mentioned their names. He jumped up and went through the door she indicated. "Dominique," she said, and pointed to another door. "The Rinpoche has asked to see you."

Surprise stopped him cold. The Rinpoche? What would an enlightened being want with him?

The figure at the other end of the long room was larger than human scale; his head nearly brushed the tall ceiling. Feeling dwarfed, Dominique forced himself forward. After several steps he realized that he was growing, or the room was shrinking around him. It was all a trick of distorted perspective. With another three steps he grew a foot, and saw that the person waiting was merely a small, dark-skinned woman with bobbed black hair. No one superhuman. Not the Rinpoche at all.

When he came to a halt before her, she smiled, but it looked sad on her face. "Dominique," she said, "I am the Voice of the Rinpoche of Sorel."

He had to force himself not to draw back. It *was* the Rinpoche, in a way. The woman was a parlant: she was transmitting to the Rinpoche all she witnessed, and he controlled all she said and did, when he chose. Dominique couldn't meet her eyes without wondering who he was seeing: herself, or the puppeteer controlling her from outside. But they said you could never tell the difference. He realized he was staring, and looked down self-consciously.

"Oracle's reading of your noetic pattern was very interesting," she said, and held out on her hand a small crystal globe enclosing what seemed to be a dandelion puff. He looked at it, then at her again.

"Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"It is a diatom graph. The best representation we have found for a human mind. Each mind has a characteristic fingerprint, a habitual way of working. We call it noetic architecture. Of course, this model is vastly simplified. But it is your diatom graph."

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Intrigued, Dominique took it from her hand and turned it around in his. Inside the glass was a tiny sphere of colored branches, all radiating from the center in an intricate network. "So it was just a brain scan Oracle did?" he asked.

"No. A brain scan maps neurons. The diatom graph shows the informational patterns of brain functions. You see, it is not the neurons that make us human. It is their rules of organization. You might say this is a picture of consciousness."

"It's very beautiful," Dominique said.

"That is no coincidence. What we call aesthetics is only our way of perceiving high levels of informational organization. In this universe, information is always growing more complex. And as it grows complex, it grows more beautiful."

"Can I keep it?" Dominique said.

"No, I will need it a little while longer."

He gave it back to her. She held it up to the light, studying it. "How does it happen that you never learned to read?"

Startled, Dominique said, "You can tell that?"

"Oh, yes. Literacy creates a fundamental change in brain functions, a characteristic trace on the diatom graph. Yours shows no hint of it."

"I really didn't need it," he said. "All I do is make and repair seismic monitors. If there are any instructions, the processor reads them or shows me."

"That is very lucky for us," the Rinpoche's Voice said.

"What?"

She smiled at him, but this time he had the feeling the smile was coming from far away. "The graph shows you have an aptitude that would have been spoiled if you had learned to read. Most people don't know it, but literacy can actually make a person less suited for certain tasks."

"Like what?" Dominique said.

Instead of answering, she said, "We practice two sorts of training here at Sorel. One is the analytical model, in which our acolytes learn to divide and classify. Rationality is segregated from fantasy, thought from feeling, desire from discipline. It is a process full of polar opposites, and from it our savants emerge. You will never be a savant."

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Dominique laughed. "I didn't need Oracle to tell me that. Gabriel's the smart one in the family."

"But there is another sort of training. In it, intuition and synthesis are the goals. We teach these acolytes no analysis. They learn sensory and spatial skills. Dream, desire, and reason are integrally connected. It enables them to make intuitive leaps and grasp whole pictures. These are the acolytes who become our voyants. That is what we wish you to be."

There was a silence as Dominique slowly absorbed what she was saying. He felt like a gyroscope that had suddenly stopped spinning. "A voyant?" he stammered. "Me?"

A note of urgency crept into her voice. "Noetic patterns like yours are extremely rare, and getting rarer. Normally, we would not accept an applicant older than five or six years. But our situation has become an emergency. We have only one voyant. You would become apprentice to Raspail."

"Hold on," Dominique said. This was going too fast.

"Yes?" the Voice said.

"What *is* a voyant, anyway?"

If she was surprised at the question, she didn't show it. "Oracle creates graphs so complex that no screen or hologram can display them whole. The only screen Oracle can draw on is the human brain itself. Humans are still the ideal decoders."

"So that's what the voyant is? The screen?"

"In a manner of speaking. Voyants' brains are specially designed to receive and sort enormous amounts of information."

"And you think I could do it?"

"I don't think. I know."

Gabriel wouldn't believe it. Plain, predictable Dominique, the brother without the brains, wanted by the savants of Sorel. Dominique nearly laughed at thought of telling his brother the unlikely news; then, as the scenario took on more reality, his thoughts skidded to a halt. Gabriel would be furious. And what would his mother do? It was impossible; his life was built on a scaffold of obligations.

"It's really nice of you — " he began.

"Let me show you something," the Rinpoche's Voice broke in. She stepped back, and Dominique saw in the shadows behind her a cylindrical

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holo vitrine. She typed quickly into its keyboard, and an image appeared.

On the floor of the vitrine was a heap of bright yellow symbols shaped like jacks but moving like tiny bugs. As Dominique watched, they milled around; finally, out of the disordered heap grew a structure a little like a honeycomb. Then, as Dominique was just about to conclude that the show was over, the honeycomb abruptly collapsed and the bugs went into a flurry of activity. Presently another structure emerged, reaching higher toward the middle of the vitrine. This time, the honeycombs were built into interlocking towers and cross-braces.

"You can watch it for hours," the Rinpoche's Voice said, "and the same events recur, but never in the same way. Each time a state of order is reached, it persists for a while, then collapses and reforms in a state of higher complexity."

"Oh," Dominique said.

"I am showing you this so you will understand how important it is for you to stay here. This model demonstrates a principle we call self-organized criticality. A system with this property exhibits long periods of stasis followed by bursts of rapid change. Many complex systems show this kind of behavior. Biological evolution, for example. Also economies, cultures, and nation-states. All dynamic systems, left to themselves, tend toward greater order and organization. Ecosystems evolve toward a state of perfect balance, cultures toward equilibrium. At last, each system will become deadlocked in a state of advanced efficiency. This is called an 'order crisis.' The system becomes so perfectly adapted that it cannot change or grow. Eventually, the slightest change results in a spontaneous outbreak of randomness in which order collapses into creative inefficiency again. In both biology and history, mass extinction results — in the one, extinction of species, in the other, extinction of cultures and ideas. But once complexity is re-established, so is flexibility and growth. It is impossible to predict what type of change will occur, but that it *will* occur is mathematically certain.

"One of our savants, who studies our present society, believes we have been locked in an order crisis since the middle of the third millennium. She is convinced we are on the brink of a phase transition into a period of chaos that will result, eventually, in a new and higher level of order. Whether this is good or bad is a subject of great debate among the

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savants. Regardless, it is highly probable that Sorel will be in the midst of this change. In fact, the pebble that starts the avalanche may be here, anywhere around us."

The shifting light from another breakdown of order in the holo vitrine reflected on her face as she looked seriously at Dominique. "The whole world is about to change, Dominique. The work we do here may determine the course of that change. We need you for that work to continue."

He thought of home, and the Neige Valley, and his friends. How permanent and trustworthy it had always seemed. If the savants were right, then all the obligations tying him to home might cease to exist.

All he had done was come to keep Gabriel company in a crazy quest. He had never even wanted Oracle to tell his future. Now it seemed his future would be changed no matter what.

"You have to stay, you see," the Rinpoche's Voice said.

"What if I can't do the work?" Dominique protested weakly.

"You can."

"You sound pretty sure."

"I've never seen a diatom graph I was surer of."

"Well, all right," Dominique said. "Maybe for a while."

She smiled. "Welcome to Sorel, Dominique Cadot."

THE RINPOCHE'S VOICE held out her hand again; this time, in it was a small crystal chip. "Take it," she said.

Dominique picked it up. It was a communication device of some sort.

"I must ask one more thing of you," she said. "We know that Sorel is balanced on the edge of change; we do not know what the trigger will be. We are all inside the pattern; it is difficult for us to see it. As Raspail's apprentice, you will have access to many things going on at the Institut. Watch for the random factor. Let me know where it is, if you see it. Press your thumb against the crystal now."

He did as she said. Nothing happened.

"Good," she said. "Now it will respond only to you. If you wish to communicate with me, press your thumb against it again. I will know you have found something."

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She took the chip from his hand, peeled off an adhesive backing, then said, "Turn around." When he did, she placed the chip behind his ear and pressed it to his skull. Startled, he felt it with a finger. "For safekeeping," she explained. "Don't worry, it's waterproof.

"Now you must meet Raspail," she said. "Please don't tell her about the chip."

Dominique forced himself not to finger the device any more. It made him vaguely uneasy to have something to hide from his tutor, as if he had been commanded to spy on her.

Across the room the door opened, and a tall woman entered. Her citrine academic gown looked hastily thrown on over a plain gray dhoura. As she crossed the distorted room, seeming to cover yards with each step, Dominique watched her face. It reminded him of Mont Chatoyer: raw contours made beautiful by the insults of time. Her gray-silver hair was cropped close; her slightly slanting eyes had deep lines beneath them.

She came to a halt before the Rinpoche's Voice. "Raspail, this is Dominique," the Voice said in a calm tone. "He has agreed to become your apprentice."

The voyant glanced at him, and muscles tightened in her face. "You can't saddle me with another assignment now," she said in a low, tense voice.

"He is not an assignment, he is an opportunity. You have seen his diatom graph."

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "Can't we send him to another institut?"

"No. We need him here. We need *you* to train him, Raspail."

For an instant Raspail closed her eyes as if to withdraw from the conversation; when she opened them again they were burning. "Have you told him the truth about the training?"

"What is the truth?"

Raspail turned on Dominique fiercely. "Becoming a voyant is hard. Harder than anything you can imagine. You must give up all that you think of as your self. There is no way to survive it without fire inside. There can be nothing in your heart but the will to be a voyant."

The Rinpoche's Voice said calmly, "And yet people have been doing it for three centuries."

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The voyant was trying to scare him off, though he didn't know why. Dominique might not have had fire inside, but he also didn't scare easily. "I've done hard things before," he said.

Her expression was as dismissive as Gabriel's. Suddenly he felt tired of always being discounted. He wanted to prove that she was wrong about him.

"Try it, Raspail," the Rinpoche's Voice said.

For a moment the voyant stood like an embattled spire defying entropy, too stubborn to fall. Then her stiff shoulders twitched in what might have been a shrug.

The Voice turned to Dominique. "Wait in the antechamber for a moment."

When Dominique reached the eight-sided waiting room, he found Gabriel standing there, hands stuffed in his pockets, brows boxing one another. "This was a total farce," he said. "They couldn't tell me a damned thing I didn't already know. So much for the Oracle; I could have gotten better advice from a fortune teller. Let's go."

So they hadn't offered him a place as an acolyte. "Gabriel — " Dominique started.

"It was just a character analysis, no guidance. It didn't settle anything."

"Gabriel, I'm not going back. You've got to tell Mother."

Slowly, Gabriel focused on him. "What?"

"They offered me an apprenticeship. To work with the voyant." In the face of Gabriel's disappointment, Dominique felt obscurely ashamed of his own good luck.

Gabriel's eyes widened as he saw his brother in a new light — the light of his own failure. "Here? A voyant?"

"It's only till they find out I can't do the work." Dominique tried to grin. "Listen, can I send you a message at the hotel tomorrow?"

"No. No, I'm not waiting around." Gabriel started off stiffly toward the entrance. "Enjoy your life," he said bitterly over his shoulder.

"It's not my fault, Gabriel!" Dominique called after him.

Gabriel didn't pause. Dominique stood, half furious, half hurt, unsure whether to go after him. A hand touched his shoulder. He looked around to find Raspail at his side.

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"Let him go," she said softly.

"But he's my brother!" Dominique said.

"You have lost him," Raspail said. "He is just the first of many things. You will have to learn to lose, and lose, and lose, if you want to be a voyant."

The words were harsh, but there was a furtive compassion in her voice, a human face frozen under ice. He sensed suddenly that she was talking about herself.

The moment was gone; now she was tense and stern again. Saying, "Come," she started toward one of the doors. Dominique glanced one last time after Gabriel, then followed her.

There was a maze of corridors. Voyant Raspail's pace picked up, till she was striding on ahead of Dominique. Down a long, dimly lit passage lined with doors her footsteps echoed impatiently. When she reached an enameled doorway she jerked it open and plunged through, into a comfortable apartment. Dominique stood in the doorway, still breathless from the walk, feeling unwelcome and uncertain what to do. Preoccupied, Raspail threw her gloves on a table, then without a word crossed to a bedroom door and slammed it behind her.

In the silence Dominique realized that someone else was sitting across the room in the darkened window seat with a book on his lap, staring at Dominique with wide and startled eyes.

"Hello," Dominique said awkwardly. "My name's Dominique."

"I am Aristide," the other said. As he set the book aside, Dominique saw that he had not been reading, but tearing the pages into intricate patterns. Aristide stood, brushing a snowfall of shredded paper onto the floor, then approached cautiously.

He was about Dominique's height, but thin as a mannikin of twisted wire. His dark eyes looked huge in his pale face. Neglected curls of black hair fell in his eyes. "What do you want?" he said.

"I guess this is where they want me to stay," Dominique said, shifting his pack. It was beginning to feel heavy.

Aristide had an intense, unblinking gaze. "These are the voyant's chambers," he said.

"I know."

"Who told you to come here?"

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"The Rinpoche's Voice. Listen, I don't want to barge in. Why don't I just go tell them this isn't working out?" He began to back away.

"No!" Suddenly, Aristide's hand shot out to stop him. His eyes searched Dominique's face for the truth. "They really sent you here? They'll let me keep you?"

Laughing to cover his confusion, Dominique said, "I guess so."

A smile lit Aristide's face. It seemed to brighten the whole room. "Come in!" he said excitedly.

Feeling welcome for the first time since setting foot in Sorel, Dominique stepped in.

A second look around revealed the eccentricity of the room. On one table, a huge multicolored mound of candle wax dripped from the edge onto the floor, studded with bits of shiny foil and surmounted by two wings broken from a ceramic angel. The carpet had been carefully unraveled on one side and rewoven to climb the wall in purple tendrils on the other.

"Does this place ever get normal?" Dominique said, rubbing his eyes wearily.

"Do you like to eat?" Aristide asked intently.

"Are you kidding?" Dominique's stomach growled at the thought.

"Good! We can order some food." He took Dominique's arm and dragged him into the kitchen.

The table was occupied by a tangled tower of interlocking forks. "Don't touch it, it's for Raspail," Aristide said. He then produced a well-thumbed menu for the autoserver.

Dominique liked to cook almost as much as he liked to eat. He was soon able to select enough raw ingredients for a decent paella. A little more hunting revealed a pan. Aristide had gotten distracted among the dishes. As Dominique began to chop vegetables, Aristide took two overturned cups and made one chase another across the counter. One of the cups was yipping.

This was not how Dominique had imagined the brilliant savants spending their time. "So, where are you from, Aristide?" he asked.

The cups paused and turned to look at him, their handles turned up inquisitively. "From?" Aristide said as if the word were nonsense. The cups turned and raced thumpingly over to the cutting board, where they sniffed garlic, then shook in delight.

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"Your home. You know, where does your family live?"

Aristide pushed a handful of black hair out of his eyes. "Oh. I don't know."

"You must have come here pretty young, then."

Aristide smiled craftily. "I didn't come here. I was made here. Raspail invented me."

He fitted two salt dishes over his eyes, and coffee mugs over his hands, then began to walk around the kitchen stiff-limbed and stub-armed, like a mechanical man from an ancient cinema. Dominique laughed. But a footstep from the bedroom next door made Aristide quickly drop the act and whisk the dishes back into the cupboard. He perched innocently on the counter. "She doesn't like me to wear the crockery," he confided in a whisper.

"What exactly do you do around here, Aristide?" Dominique asked, dumping oil into the pan.

Aristide stared as if he'd asked the purpose of the floor. "I am Raspail's apprentice."

"Oh, really? I didn't know she had one already. That's what I'm going to be."

"You?" Aristide looked as if he couldn't decide whether to collapse in laughter.

"That's what they tell me."

A thought occurred to Aristide; as it crossed his face, it wiped out the laughter. "Is this because of what I did yesterday?" he said.

"I don't know. What did you do yesterday?"

"I imploded a datamass. It was just a fluke, a backwash in the processing flow. I didn't do it on purpose." He looked at Dominique apprehensively. "It was Savant Barrère's. She's working on historical dynamics and the coming phase transition. Have you heard of it?"

"I think so."

Aristide leaned close and whispered, "I wiped out all her data. We don't know if she has a copy. Raspail hasn't dared to ask her yet."

Dominique paused, spoon in hand. The paella sizzled in the pan. "That sounds kind of serious," he said.

Aristide began to laugh uproariously. "The savants are going to slit my throat when they find out." He sobered abruptly. "They don't know yet, do they?"

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"I don't know. I don't think it has anything to do with my being here."

Nevertheless, Aristide fell silent and thoughtful. Dominique dished up two plates of food. He wolfed down two helpings, standing at the counter, while Aristide toyed unhungrily with his. Glancing across the stove, Dominique noticed how delicate Aristide's hands were — fragile and fine, as if blown out of milky, translucent glass. He looked up and found the apprentice watching him. He smiled, but Aristide crossed his arms defensively to hide his hands.

"What kind of work does an apprentice voyant do?" Dominique asked.

"Didn't they tell you?"

"Voyant Raspail tried. All she could say was how hard it was. I figured she was trying to scare me away."

Aristide paused. "If I answered, you would think I was trying to scare you as well."

"Just tell me what it's like to operate the Oracle."

Aristide's eyes looked past Dominique, toward some horizon that wasn't there. "You should ask what it's like *not* to operate Oracle. Compared to Oracle, everything else is like being a fish in muddy water. All you know is upstream and downstream. There is no sky, no landscape, only murk."

"So you think I ought to stay?"

Aristide turned eyes oddly drained of emotion on him. In a flat voice, he said, "If I were you, I would get out of here as fast as I could, and run till they could never find me again."

Dominique was no longer hungry. He put down his fork to study Aristide, wondering what he meant. "But you're still here," he said.

"I said if I were *you*."

They said little after that. Aristide went back out into the living room and set to work shredding his book again. Dominique wandered around, yawning hugely. At last he said, "Where do you want me to sleep?"

"There's an extra bed in my room," Aristide said, and got up to show him.

It turned out to be no more than a cot, but Dominique gratefully tossed his pack on it, then followed suit himself.

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There was a night stand between the beds, placed against the window, and on it burned a candle with a glass hurricane shade over it. Dominique stared at it, in his drowsiness struggling to grasp a revelation he felt ought to be there.

"I know," he said. "We saw that candle earlier tonight, when we came up the road to Sorel. I asked Gabriel why anyone would want to light a candle here."

"Dominique," Aristide said seriously, "Do dogs fall in love?"

Dominique was too sleepy to make sense of that. "I don't know," he said.

But as soon as he burrowed under the pile of quilts and lay still, sleep eluded him. All that had happened kept swirling through his mind.

When he turned to look, Aristide was lying on his bed, head propped on his fist, watching the candle. Its yellow flame cast a gentle light on his face. He looked pensive, as if remembering something from long ago. "Why *do* you light it?" Dominique said at last.

"Down in the east wing they teach the acolytes to model flames in mathematics," Aristide said.

"Did you learn to do that?"

"No. I was never an acolyte. They couldn't let me learn to read. But I have seen the mathematics modeled by Oracle. I have seen a flame created from formulas instead of wax. At this scale it looks simple, but on the molecular level it's incredibly turbulent. The surface is wrinkly, and inside it's all stretched and distorted. Did you know that a flame is the opposite of a living thing?"

"No."

"It's an information-conversion system, just like a plant or a person. But instead of building patterns, as life will, it destroys them. It's a little pocketful of entropy."

Those were the last words Dominique heard before drifting off to sleep.

Later that night he roused long enough to see that the candle had burned down to a stub. He reached out to snuff it, but Aristide lunged out and caught his wrist in a steely grip. "Don't touch it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Sorry," Dominique stammered. "I thought you were asleep."

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As he tried to fall asleep again, he could see the glint of Aristide's eyes watching him from out of the darkness.

Chapter 2

When Sorel slept, Oracle still woke. Quiet atop its mountain peak, the unsleeping witness watched the galaxies, listened to the wind, measured the grinding motion of the earth underneath, always searching for pattern. But like its Delphic namesake, all its information was useless until someone asked it the right question. Oracle did not draw conclusions. It drew pictures.

Dominique woke with a stripe of sunlight lying across his face. Aristide was a motionless lump in the opposite bed. When Dominique turned onto his back, he saw what he had missed the night before: the ceiling above him was a collage of glass bottles shattered at the necks. Their bases were glued to the ceiling, sharp edges pointing down. The sunlight winked off them, tossing wild spectra around the room: ruby, jade, peacock, sapphire. Dominique didn't feel easy till he had gotten out from under them.

When he came into the living room, he found Voyant Raspail sitting in the window seat, studying the book Aristide had demolished the night before. She finished dictating into a recorder, then paused to take a photo of a damaged page.

"So you are still here," she said. When she looked up, her face was austere, as if marshaled tight against despondence. Dominique wondered how anyone so successful could seem so unhappy.

"Where did you sleep?" she asked.

"Aristide's room."

"What did Aristide say?"

"He was very nice." Dominique's instinct was not to say much till he knew what was going on. "No one mentioned you already had an apprentice."

"No. They wouldn't." Her voice was flat as rolled metal. "There are many bright people here at Sorel, but not many kind ones. From your graph, I think kindness is something you have."

His mother had always teased him about being the one in the family

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who looked after stray animals and idiots. Meaning Gabriel, of course. He had never mentally translated that into "kindness," but the word certainly didn't offend him.

"Look after him, will you?" Raspail said softly.

There was a silence. At last Dominique said, "I'm sure Aristide doesn't need my protection."

"Oh, yes he does," Raspail whispered.

"From what?"

"From Sorel."

She rose, and her voice turned neutral. "What's your background? Do you know how to use a headnet?"

"Of course," Dominique said. What was she thinking? Everyone knew how to use headnets.

"A DI helmet?"

"Yes. I got a license to use them in my work."

"Remote manipulation?"

Dominique wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Sometimes." Often, actually. When hardware in the field broke or needed a skilled overhaul, he usually linked up with someone on the spot via the DI helmet. It fed him their perceptions, and allowed him to manipulate their hands and eyes. The transmission was expensive, but not as expensive as going there in the flesh. He had never gotten used to the feeling of operating someone else, or being operated himself. "I think it's creepy," he said.

"A common reaction," Raspail said. "You will have to overcome it."

There was a stumble of bare feet behind them. Aristide came from the bedroom, still punching his way out of a cocoon of fatigue. When he saw them he froze, eyes shifting apprehensively from one to the other.

Raspail went to him. A few feet away, she held out her hand, elbow crooked as if to arm-wrestle in the air. He took the challenge, and for a few moments they held a mock-competition, straining against one another. Aristide finally won, and Raspail put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him close to kiss his forehead. Then she turned away toward the window, the remote scholar again.

A revelation hit Dominique: They loved each other. Raspail was trying not to show it, but there had been a bright, brief flash of joy out of the grayness when she had seen Aristide.

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This is going to be complicated, Dominique thought.

"Tea?" Aristide asked him.

"Sure," he said, and followed into the kitchen.

They sat around the kitchen table, from which the fork sculpture had mysteriously disappeared. Aristide played with his paper napkin, folding it into complicated shapes. Raspail stared, preoccupied, into her teacup.

"We need to work on Barrère's project today," she said.

Aristide glanced at her through dark hair.

"I recorded a pattern just before pulling you out of that feedback loop. Do you remember it?"

Aristide shook his head, staring at his napkin, which was now shaped like a crab. When he looked up, Dominique saw dread in his eyes.

Persuasively, Raspail said, "If it is what I think, no one will even notice a little lost data. But you need to look at it."

Aristide began slowly pulling the legs off the crab.

"Can I see it, too?" Dominique asked.

From the voyant's look he knew he had said something ridiculous. She seemed to be searching for a way to break it to him kindly. "If you were to enter Oracle's processing flow without training, and were lucky, you would see nothing. If you were unlucky, the chances are good that the information load would incinerate your brain. The graphic we are working on is drawn on a five-dimensional manifold. Can you even imagine four dimensions? Think of the three you know, then try to picture a fourth axis projecting at a right angle to all the others."

Dominique tried, then shook his head. Raspail said, "It is impossible without Oracle's help. Oracle lets us perceive dimensions we cannot even imagine otherwise. But it takes years of practice to do it safely."

"Let him see Oracle, at least," Aristide suggested suddenly.

"I saw it last night," Dominique said.

Raspail laughed. "What you saw was — how shall I put it? A church, a theater. A drama of lights and echoes they call Oracle. The savants had it built to impress the pilgrims in reward for their donations. The real Oracle is in this wing." She rose. "Come with us."

She led the way out of the apartment into the corridor of endless doors. The fourth on the left, indistinguishable from all the others, was the one she chose. Inside was an airlock, and beyond that two more dust-seal

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doors that finally opened onto a curving ramp that led gently downward. The air was odorless and quiet.

Dominique drew close to Aristide as Raspail strode on ahead. "Thanks," he said quietly. "I was afraid she wasn't going to let me get near Oracle."

"You were *near* it last night," Aristide said. "Our apartment is built into the side of it."

"You mean — "

"We're inside it now."

They had begun to pass doorways to right and left. There was a slight hum from the air conditioning. Raspail slowed her pace and said, "These are the entrances to specialized control chambers. Most have been added in the past 180 years, as we learned to use Oracle for different purposes."

"What sort of purposes?" Dominique asked.

"Basal lattices, Weisman nets, filicology."

Only the last made any sense to Dominique. "Study of ferns? You have a special room for that?"

"Study of fernlike information structures," Raspail said patiently.

"Do you have to know all those disciplines?"

"Ideally, we would have a voyant specializing in each. We used to. When I was an apprentice there was a team of voyants, and these control rooms were busy round the clock. These days, we are just muddling through."

She drew ahead again. Aristide whispered, "Don't worry, you don't need to know all the disciplines. Sometimes the savants don't even tell us what their projects are about; they just give us the data to play with."

As the ramp spiraled deeper into Oracle's throat, Dominique felt around him a presence, watching. Uneasily, he asked, "Does Oracle have a brain?"

"It is not aware, if that is what you mean," Raspail said without turning.

The rampway ended in the last control booth. As they entered, the lights and instrument panel came on automatically. The room was domed and circular, lined with screens and equipment except on the far right, where a section of photonic processors had been removed to make space

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for a small glassblower's furnace and marble-topped work table, now cluttered with tongs, crucibles, and a stack of glass rods.

In the center of the room stood two reclined chairs, back to back so that the headrests touched. Their leather covers were worn smooth with use. Aristide perched on one. Meanwhile, Raspail put on a headnet to call up a holographic display. She set it rotating in the vitrine. It was a mere jumble of lines, showing no structure at all. "This is a three-dimensional projection of the graph we will be working with," she said. "This is vastly simplified, of course. The display surface is actually folded through two other dimensions that cannot be shown, only experienced. Savants have spent whole careers inventing new topologies to vex us."

"What can you tell from a graph like that?" Dominique asked.

"From this? Nothing. It's pure trash. But what is disordered on one scale may show structure on another." She hit a key, and the display shrank to a point, bringing more of the image within view. After half a dozen displays had been reduced to spots in thevitrine, a ghostly regularity appeared. The tangles of disorder were embedded in a matrix of pattern.

"Everything depends on scale," Raspail said thoughtfully. "What makes no sense on one scale, may be the answer to everything on another."

She stood up, her face severe. "You have had your first lesson. Now go back and wait for us. We have work to do."

Disappointed, Dominique said, "Can't I just watch?"

"No," Raspail said. "This is between us." She put a hand possessively on Aristide's arm.

Dominique backed out the door.

The empty apartment seemed very quiet. Dominique stood for a while at the window, staring across the snowy valley to the unscalable west wall of Mont Chatoyer. It seemed very distant from here. Just as his mind began wandering back to home, he noticed that the window frame was gouged, as if someone had tried to dig through it with a pocket knife.

He turned back into the living room. What he had taken for a library the night before was in fact a large collection of disks with a few real books mixed in, all full of pictures without a line of type. Behind a chair he found a well-worn DI helmet and put it on to try out some of the disks. Most were labeled only with dates, so he picked one at random.

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As soon as he lowered the eyephones, he found himself back in the control room, lying on one of the chairs, staring up at the domed ceiling. The resolution and detail were far better than any DI he had ever experienced. He could actually feel the leather, the weight of his body, the hum of machinery around him. Before he had a chance to take it all in, the recording went on.

A bubble appeared in the air above the bridge of his nose. He — or the person whose experience this disk recorded — closed his eyes, and the world was transformed.

He was floating in a crystalline landscape under a flowering fractal tree. Above him, colors he had never seen before shivered down the sky. He watched, entranced, till someone touched him, sending a cascade of sensation through his body. The feeling was intensely erotic.

He spun around, realizing in mid-motion that he no longer had a body; he was no more than an algorithm in phase space. And yet sensation was even more intense, as if flesh were a poor transmitter and he now felt raw stimulation pouring unimpeded into his brain. A glittering stream of air caressed him, and he knew instinctively it was Raspail. The pulse of feeling that followed made the part of him that was still Dominique squirm in discomfort. Against his will he felt his body inflamed with a strange, abstract desire. Slowly she blended with him, merging, running through him like a stream. He was closer to her than it was possible for anyone to be; every nerve in her body kissed one of his. He felt a rush of erotic adoration that wasn't his own.

Guilty and overstimulated, he raised his hand to shut the helmet off. But as he moved the scene changed. Raspail withdrew from him, leaving him feeling small and empty, like half a person. Now he was surrounded by a crackling web of threads that flared and buzzed dangerously where they crossed. They were close to his naked nerves. Gingerly he reached out to deform the web. With a painful snap of electricity, one thread broke. Blood spurted from the severed end, drenching his face. As it hit him it began to crawl. It was a spray of maggots, wriggling, hungry for his brain. He wanted to scream, but they were all over his face, burrowing at his eyes, crawling into his ears and nose. He could feel them wriggling inside his eyeballs; they began to eat away at the scene before him, revealing another, darker scene beneath. A visceral terror gripped him; he didn't

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want to see the hidden thing they were revealing. Yet he was paralyzed, unable to stop looking.

There was a crash. Dominique ripped off the helmet and threw it across the room. He saw Aristide bolt through the door and into the kitchen, his face pasty white. Putting a hand out to steady himself, Dominique brought the rest of his mind back. He went to the kitchen door. Aristide was vomiting violently into the sink.

At length Aristide turned on the faucet and splashed cold water in his face. He turned, saw Dominique, and froze.

"What's wrong?" Dominique said. He felt a little queasy himself.

"Nothing," Aristide said tensely. "I'm fine. If Raspail asks, tell her that. Promise?"

Dominique was too confused to do anything but nod. Aristide drew himself up and started toward the bedroom, holding onto the wall. His eyes kept tracking to the left, as if trying to follow a room that was spinning around him. When he came to a halt, swaying, Dominique took his arm and began to lead him. Aristide clutched his shoulder in terror. "I'll fall," he said. "It's too far down."

"Don't worry, I'll catch you," Dominique said.

When they reached the bed, Aristide curled up on it in fetal position, eyes closed. Dominique hovered anxiously over him. "Can I get you something?" he asked.

Aristide's eyes snapped open, looking straight into Dominique's. "I'll break your brain across my knee if you try to take her," he whispered.

"I won't," Dominique said.

Aristide's eyes drifted leftward again, then closed. "You're a good one, Dominique. Don't tell Raspail."

The living room no longer seemed quite so comfortable. Dominique moved restlessly from chair to chair, avoiding the DI helmet that had landed on the couch. He tried to look at the picture books, but the images seemed disjointed and senseless.

Hours later, Raspail came back. Her step was light, and there was an elated, buoyant look to her. She held up a spool and said, "I've got it. This is the graph the savants have been waiting for." She tossed it across the room; Dominique scrambled to catch it before it hit the floor. Raspail had already turned toward the kitchen. When she came back with a drink in

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her hand, she went to the couch and picked up the helmet. Dominique realized he had left it running all this time.

"Did you try this?" she said, popping the disk out and glancing at it.

Dominique's neck grew uncomfortably hot; did she know what was on it? "I didn't think — " he stammered.

"I suppose it can't do you any harm, not like the real thing. We tried to record sessions in Oracle for a while, but it was useless. The resolution is too poor. It was not even close to vivid enough." She looked at him, frowning slightly. "Did you see anything?"

"Only a little," Dominique said, feeling sweaty. He could barely meet her eyes.

"Next time you should try the training simulations, over here. They hone the perceptual skills you will need as a voyant. You will have to get very good at all of them before I can let you try Oracle."

Dominique was no longer certain he wanted to try Oracle. He itched to tell her about Aristide, but he had given his word. "How long does it take? The training, I mean."

"It varies." Raspail waved a hand vaguely.

"Well, how long has Aristide been?"

Her face lost its openness. "He is a special case. He was an acolyte before I discovered him. It damaged him."

"Damaged?" Dominique said, eyes widening.

"He learned to read. I have had to unteach him. It has taken a long time. You will not have to worry about that."

Dominique was silent, thinking of the different story Aristide had told him. Why should either of them lie to him? He found himself staring at the spool Raspail had tossed to him so casually. "What is it you've discovered?" he said.

Stretching out her legs, Raspail chuckled. She didn't exactly look happy — Dominique was not sure that was possible — but she did look triumphant. "I don't know," she said. "The savants don't always tell us what the data signify. All I know is, it will be completely unexpected. It relates the algorithms in a way no one has ever imagined."

"Will they be able to predict the future now?"

She looked puzzled. "What makes you say that?"

"I thought you were studying the patterns of history."

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"Oh, yes. But we have long since proved that prediction is impossible."

"Then what are you trying to find?"

"You are falling into the old deterministic fallacy, like scientists back in the days before the Renaissance Dernier." She rose and paced across to the window, where the setting sun cast shadows over the complex planes of her face. She looked like the statue of an enigma.

She said, "There was once a scientist named Laplace who imagined that we lived in a clockwork world. The universe, he thought, was a mechanism that would be perfectly predictable if only we knew the rules. For generations, people believed that everything was ultimately reducible to linear formulae. Respectable savants even said that history could be forecast, once we nailed down certain psychological variables.

"What they didn't know was that not even perfect clockwork, not even the motion of the planets, is predictable on a larger scale. Every natural process has an element of chaos in it which makes it inherently unpredictable. It may not show itself on our scale, but it is there. Thank God. If we actually lived in a world like the one Laplace described, it would be impossible to generate new information. We would be locked in a perpetual order crisis — an eternal, perfect stasis.

"But that is not true. The universe is *not* deterministic; it is complex and stochastic. Information is continually being created, leading from uniformity to variety. Nature generates its own novelty. So the future is fundamentally different from the past. Looking backward, we see less and less information. Ahead, there are novel new forms of complexity. We cannot predict them, because they are generated through random processes. It is that randomness we need to seek out. Disequilibrium is the creative state. It leads through confusion to a higher order of order."

Her low voice held a thrill of conviction. It gave Dominique an insecure feeling. "But — " he started.

"Yes?"

"Randomness can destroy, too. Don't you run a risk of losing the order we have?"

She stood still, looking out the window. Dominique watched the light fade on her face as the sun traveled beyond the mountain ridge. There was a deep crease between her eyebrows. She said, "Do you believe in evil, Dominique?"

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It was not the answer he had expected. He stammered, "Well, I believe people sometimes do harmful things."

"No, I don't mean stupidity, or malice, or anything that can be avoided. I mean evil that is woven into the fabric of a situation so that there is no way of avoiding it. A terrible course that draws you in, and you can't stop and can't go back, so you just continue on, knowing that you are doing harm, and will do more before the end."

He said nothing. At last she turned to look at him. "That is a matter of scale, too. On the micro scale of human lives, randomness may cause harm. I have to be concerned with a larger scale."

That evening, Raspail's openness bled away, leaving the silent, moody person Dominique had seen before. They ate supper without exchanging a word, Raspail starting tensely at every sound. Through the whole evening she never asked about Aristide.

When Dominique came into the darkened bedroom that night, Aristide had not moved. Dominique silently lit the candle in the window before going to bed. He slept uneasily under the dangling bottles.

THE NEXT MORNING when Dominique woke, the other bed was empty. When he came out into the living room he stopped in his tracks. The shelves had all been emptied, the disk boxes dumped in a pilfered heap on the floor. The disks filled the air, dangling on threads from the light fixtures, the curtain rods, the furniture. Their rainbow surfaces winked and flashed in the morning sun, a dazzling galaxy of round-eyed stars. Dominique threaded his way into the room, ducking to avoid tiny rotating suns. He wondered how they would ever get the disks back into the proper boxes.

Aristide was sitting like an allegorical god on the bottom of an overturned chair, wrapped in a sheet, his head surrounded with spinning disks. "Guess what, Dominique?" he cried out.

"What?"

"We have a day off. Raspail's gone down into the savants' den to throw them some red meat. We can do whatever we want. What do you want?"

Dominique said, "Whatever you usually do on a day off."

"Good! I'll take you to see the salle des cerveaux, then." He jumped up as if to start off right then and there.

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"You can't go like that," Dominique said.

Aristide looked down, saw that he was dressed only in a sheet, and broke into laughter.

Half an hour later, Dominique was trying to keep up with him as he darted like a loose electron down the hallways of Sorel. All of the previous day's malaise was gone; Aristide acted like his veins were running with electricity. He kept Dominique laughing the whole way to the east wing.

"Wait here," he said at one doorway. "Don't come in till I call."

When Dominique heard the call, he stepped through. The room before him was a large open cortile filled with a maze of stairways he would have to thread, down then up, to reach the spot where Aristide stood on the other side. He started out, but stopped, blinking. The stairways were impossible ones — disconcerting trompes l'oeil that made a mockery of dimension. One veered sideways, disappearing into a vertical wall painted so cleverly that the steps seemed to continue on in two dimensions, though no person could climb them. Another switchbacked so that the only way to climb every other flight was upside-down. Another passed through an archway then continued on, tilted sideways. Dominique could see no path for anyone but a two-dimensional image to get through.

Across the room, Aristide was laughing hysterically at his reaction. "Here, Dominique!" he called. "Come on. You can do it!"

Dominique stepped over a painted drop, then stopped, seized with vertigo. His feet told him he stood on solid ground, but his eyes told him otherwise. "I can't," he said.

Still laughing, Aristide ran lightly down a stairway, jumped to another, then followed a winding path through the maze till he stood at Dominique's side. "You really *are* a voyant," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"The savants are such numskulls they can barely see the illusion, much less be confused by it."

"I thought the savants were really smart," Dominique said.

"Not in our way. But then, we're not smart in their way, either."

Dominique laughed. "I know I'm not."

Aristide took his arm. "Here, I'll show you across."

It took a nerve-racking half-minute of stepping over painted preci-

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pices. When he stood safely on the other side he blew out a breath, glad it was over. "Is that the salle des cerveaux?" he asked.

"Oh no, just a game," Aristide answered.

As they continued on they began to meet acolytes hurrying past, eyeshades studiously lowered, and clusters of saffron-robed savants holding discussions in the hallways. More than one conversation broke off as they passed.

"Why are they staring?" Dominique whispered to Aristide.

"It's an old tradition," Aristide answered breezily. "The east and west wings don't mix much. Savants think, voyants see. They think we're 'surface personalities.' We think they're pompous dopes."

They came to a monumental entryway that had once been on the exterior; later construction had swallowed it, making it look out of proportion. Aristide led the way through tall doors into a lobby. At a desk a tall, portly woman was staring disdainfully at their approach.

"What do *you* want?" she demanded.

"To marry you, Charron," Aristide said.

"Get out of my library."

"You'll break my heart."

She clenched her jaw as if to force back words she might regret. "I suppose you want to see the salle des cerveaux."

"Thank you."

"Wait while I get the key."

The librarian lumbered heavily off. Dominique was aware that several scholars were staring coldly at them. He could not fit Aristide's explanation to the acutely *personal* hostility he sensed. One savant — a handsome man with thick brown hair and a gray-shot beard over a strong chin — looked about to rise and confront them.

"You see him?" Aristide whispered. Dominique nodded. "That's Gaspard Desnoyer, the noetic architect. Watch out for him. He's tried to murder me."

Dominique stared at his companion, but Aristide's expression was as carefree as it had been all morning. "Are you serious?"

"Oh, yes. You see, he used to be Raspail's lover. Things went wrong, and now he is her enemy."

The librarian was beckoning at them from a doorway. When they

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caught up with her, she turned to lead the way down an aisle of study cubicles. Walking behind her, Aristide mimicked her rolling gait, making a pair of acolytes in a nearby cubicle explode in laughter. Charron whipped round, but Aristide was all innocence again.

They came to a double set of black lacquer doors with ornate silver fittings. The librarian waved her key card before a lock panel, and the entry light flashed on. "The surveillance is on," she said. "Don't touch anything."

Dominique had intended to ask Aristide what he meant by "murder" as soon as they were alone, but at the remark about surveillance he put the question away for later.

The salle des cerveaux was empty, and very still. The walls were made of polished stone so black it disappeared in the dim light, giving the illusion of great space. Along the walls, on identical black pedestals, stood holo projections, each display floating in dark air.

Dominique approached the first projection. "It's a diatom graph," he said. His voice sounded loud in the silence.

"This is the savants' reference collection," Aristide whispered. "The graphs they study are preserved here. There are millions on file. But these aren't the ones I want you to see."

He led Dominique through a chain of dark rooms, all lined with minds from the past. There were athletes and musicians, statesmen, philosophers, and tyrants. One chain of rooms held pathologies: autism, paranoia, dementia. Dominique lingered before a species of psychosis, wondering how to tell it from the normal graphs.

"I thought these diseases didn't exist anymore," he said.

"They don't," Aristide answered. "They're gone, just like criminal pathologies. Diatom graphs made it possible to cure them. Until we had a way of telling the diseases apart and measuring whether therapies did any good, no one knew what worked. It was just guesses. You wouldn't believe some of the things they did."

"Is everyone's diatom graph on file?"

"No, data space is too valuable. They just keep statistics and benchmarks. Come on, this way."

They came to a long, narrow gallery that curved out of sight before them. Here, there were no holo vitrine; the delicate webwork spheres had

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been sculpted in glass, some tinted, others silver. The only light was on the art works, making them glow as if from within.

Aristide pointed to the plaque on the first pedestal, which held only the name Bernaud. "The first Voyant of Sorel," he said. "This room has all the great ones."

"Why are they done in glass?" Dominique asked.

Aristide shrugged. "It's a tradition."

Dominique walked down the line of sculptures, dazzled by their crystalline clarity. It took several minutes for him to notice the common feature. On the interior, the glass strands followed a myriad of patterns; but on the outside surface all were the same.

"That is called the Bernaud pattern," Aristide explained. "A person must have it in order to interface with Oracle. It is the result of the training Raspail told you about."

"So these patterns aren't natural?" Dominique asked.

"What's natural?"

"Well, these aren't the diatom graphs they were born with?"

"No one has the graph they were born with. Graphs change all the time; that's what learning is. Of course, Oracle causes changes you can't learn any other way. They choose apprentices for their similarity to the Bernaud pattern. It makes the training go faster."

"How long have you been in training, Aristide?" Dominique asked.

Aristide was silent a moment, staring at the sculpture before him. "I don't know," he said at last.

It was a clumsy evasion, but Dominique decided to let it drop.

As they walked on down the line, Dominique noticed a change. The first sculpture had been simple and symmetrical, the glass strands linked in a self-repeating geometry. But farther down the gallery, the graphs became more tangled. They branched like elm roots before reaching the resolution of the outer surface.

"They think there has actually been a change in mental organization," Aristide said. "Diatom graphs like Bernaud's don't exist anymore. Every generation it gets a little harder to find apprentices whose graphs are close enough. Always the training takes longer."

The last sculpture in line was Raspail's. It had an odd, mirror-image structure, full of patterns reversed upon themselves. Aristide gazed at it,

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entranced. "They installed hers just last year, when even the savants had to admit she was as great as Bernaud. It's the most beautiful graph here."

The gallery stretched on in darkness, waiting for more sculptures. Dominique nudged Aristide. "Is yours going to be here?"

"Raspail is making it herself," Aristide said, looking off to where it would stand, beside his teacher's.

"But you're not even a voyant yet," Dominique said, surprised.

"She knows what she is doing."

They walked back to the lacquer doors in silence.

When they reached the door of the library again, Gaspard Desnoyer was waiting for them. He fell in step beside Dominique. Aristide pretended not to see.

"Introduce me to your friend, Aristide," the savant said.

"Piss off, Gaspard," Aristide answered. "You're such a sore loser."

Gaspard turned to Dominique and offered his hand. "I'm Savant Desnoyer. I take it you are Raspail's new apprentice."

His handshake was vigorous, his face looked not at all homicidal; but then, Dominique was not stealing away his lover. "I'm Dominique Cadot," he said.

"I've seen your diatom graph. Very impressive. We're glad to have you here."

"Bite him, Dominique," Aristide said.

"Oh, we're full of wit today, aren't we?" Gaspard said acidly.

"I can't speak for you," said Aristide. "You don't seem to have enough wit to know when you're acting like an out-of-work gigolo."

Without a word, Gaspard gathered the front of Aristide's garment in his fist and lifted him briefly off the floor; Aristide dangled like a puppet, his face blank with surprise. Then Gaspard propelled him backward down the hall to a small doorway, and waved a keycard before the lock panel. When the door sprang open on a janitor's closet the savant thrust Aristide forcefully into it. Hoses and brooms clattered down as Gaspard slammed the door and keyed in a lock code. None of the other savants walking in the hall even paused.

Gaspard took Dominique's elbow in a firm grip and led him away down the hall. "Now we can talk sensibly, without that moron in the way."

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Stunned, Dominique looked back at the closet door. There was not a sound from inside. "But — "

"Oh, don't worry about him," Gaspard said. "The idiot will find a way out. He always does." His voice dropped. "I want to talk to you alone. I think it's important you know the truth about what's going on here."

"How has it been going?" Gaspard asked.

"What?"

"The training."

They sat in an alcove in a lounge shaped like the inside of a lung. Groups in saffron robes and eyeshades occupied other booths, the spongy walls drinking the sound of their voices.

Uneasily, Dominique said, "She says I have to learn all sorts of training simulations before I can try Oracle. It'll take a long time."

"Don't believe her!" Gaspard said fiercely. He reached over and grasped Dominique's arm as if to infuse him with combativeness. "You can start on Oracle now, I know it. She's just stalling so her boytoy's incompetence won't become obvious. Don't let her do it. Demand your rights."

Dominique shifted uncomfortably. He didn't want to get caught up in this intensely personal war.

At Dominique's hesitation, Gaspard's eyes narrowed. "What has that liar told you about me?"

"Listen, I'm not on anyone's side," Dominique said.

"Not yet," Gaspard said.

"I'm not going to be."

"If you don't know both sides, you're on one of them through sheer ignorance. Do you know about me and Raspail?"

"Is it true?"

"Oh, yes. It was the old attraction of opposites, I suppose, the marriage of intellect and inspiration. I lived with her in the west wing for years. But it all started going bad seven years ago, when she discovered that 'apprentice' of hers. He was thirteen."

"Seven years?" Dominique said. At last he knew how long the training took.

Gaspard shifted as if something were pricking him. "It's become the

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Institut's nasty little secret. Even the janitors have guessed by now that training is the least of what they're doing."

He frowned off over Dominique's shoulder, into the past. "I've known all along, in a way. There was nothing about his graph that suited him to be a voyant. I thought she would get bored with his adolescent infatuation, if I only waited. But Oracle is a land we can't imagine, and that's where they spent their time. She became obsessed. And I became irrelevant, and finally inconvenient."

His voice had turned bitter; he forced himself to shrug as if it meant nothing. But he still radiated anger like a stove coil hot enough to burn but not to glow. "She could have trained five voyants in the time she's wasted pretending to train him. When they started, we had three voyants who were barely keeping pace with the demand. Now the other two have retired or died, and everyone is still waiting for Aristide to take over part of the work. The truth that no one wants to believe is that he *never will.*

"Meanwhile, our research is at a standstill; savants have to wait in line six months for time on Oracle. The whole east wing is in a state of revolt. It's intolerable, especially at such a critical time. If Raspail weren't doing the best work of her career, no one would put up with it. But all I can think of is what she could be doing if he weren't wasting her time."

Gaspard's voice had risen again; he stopped himself. "Of course, my personal feelings don't enter into this. I am first to admit, Raspail is at the pinnacle of her career. The work she is doing is brilliant. She has to be freed, for the good of Sorel."

Dominique looked away, feeling as if just being here was participating in Gaspard's self-deception. When he looked back, the savant had an expression of eager hungriness. "That's where you come in. Your arrival was a godsend. She can't say you're unsuited; she *has* to train you. It may be the thing to break the impasse. A lot of hopes are riding on you."

Dominique felt like hiding under his chair. He didn't want this responsibility.

Gaspard glanced up and stiffened; Aristide was leaning casually against the entrance to their alcove.

"Finished feeding him poison yet, Gaspard?" Aristide asked. He had a new rip in one sleeve, and a smudge of dirt across his forehead.

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Gaspard pointedly turned back to Dominique. "I'd like to talk to you again soon, to hear about your progress."

Taking this as his cue, Dominique rose to go. "Sure. Thanks."

"Good luck," Gaspard said.

As the two apprentices walked back, Dominique could make new sense of the glances the savants cast their way. The contempt wasn't meant for him; it was all directed at Aristide. The voyant's toy. The dirty secret of Sorel.

"You didn't believe him, did you?" Aristide said in a low voice. He walked with a defiant posture.

"I don't know," Dominique said.

"I thought you were supposed to be loyal."

"If he was lying, then why won't Raspail let me do anything or see anything?"

In a barely audible voice, Aristide said, "She's afraid you'll find out too much."

Dominique hesitated, then said, "You mean about you and her? Why should I care how you spend your spare time?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you."

And Dominique couldn't get another word out of him the rest of the way back.

When they arrived at the voyant's quarters, Raspail was waiting anxiously at the door. "Did you go to the east wing?" she asked Aristide.

"Yes," he said, passing by her into the apartment. She followed him closely, leaving Dominique to close the door.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she said.

With a false lightness Aristide answered, "I just had to check whether they still hate us as much as ever. I shouldn't have bothered."

Raspail's voice was tight with tension. "Don't worry about them, Aristide. They will eat their words."

"Yes, but will I be around to see it?" He went into his room and closed the door.

Raspail stood staring after him, her whole body stiff, one hand clutching at her throat. When she turned round, her face looked stricken.

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Dominique went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet so he couldn't hear another word. He opened a cupboard and began rummaging loudly for a bowl to make some salad in.

Was this how history was made? Were the crucial branching points ruled not by the great forces of cultural evolution, but by personal jealousies and wars of thwarted love?

Great events were not supposed to be like this.

THE SKY OUTSIDE the Rinpoche's chamber was the utter black of a lunar day. The rugged gray terrain of Mare Nectaris stretched to the sudden horizon. Overhead, the bright sickle of a crescent Earth hung motionless in the sky. Neither the Rinpoche's Voice nor Gaspard Desnoyer spared it a glance. They were both bent over the display in the holo vitrine.

It showed the graph of Barrère's data that Raspail had produced: an abstract sculpture of sharp, slashing lines and intermittent snow. "How can Raspail make sense of this?" Gaspard said. "I can't understand it, even abstracted and simplified like this."

"I find it unsettling," Naidu said.

"It damn well should be. It proves what trouble we're in if the Redpath phenomenon grows."

Naidu rubbed her temples. It had not been a good day. Something the Rinpoche had done — she was not even sure what — had set her off, and she had cried uncontrollably for two hours. It had left her with a splitting headache. But even the physical pain could not mask the underlying emptiness.

Gaspard was watching her. He had been analyzing her graph for ways to help her. He said, "You should think of getting back to your work, Naidu, instead of spending the days mourning him."

Getting back to her work meant letting someone else operate her. "I couldn't," she said. "It would seem like a desecration to let someone else in, where he once was."

"It's as if you've become imprinted on him," Gaspard said. "He should never have used you so exclusively. It just shows how dangerous this improved DI technology is. And the Redpaths want to give it to everyone."

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With an effort, Naidu brought her mind back to the problem at hand — Savant Barrère's theory about the source of social imbalance. The spread of DI technology had the potential of a new communication revolution, but completely different from all the previous ones. All communication technology up to now — language, print, electronics — had excelled at transmitting rational, linear thought. The DI was useless at that, but had leaped ahead at transmission of perception, motor skills, and emotion. Widely used, it would foreground the instinctive, emotional side of the human psyche, and devalue the rational.

"We may not be able to stop it," Naidu said. "It may not be our place to stop it."

"No one's arguing for stagnation," Gaspard said. "All we want is control. We outgrew rapid, uncontrolled change along with the other evils of pre-Renaissance society. We don't let our civilization run amok anymore, charging randomly into success or catastrophe. We're not gypsy moths or viruses. We choose our future. That's what makes us human."

With a few keystrokes, Naidu brought up the graph showing the line of human culture threading over the rough landscape. She backed it up several centuries. Here, the culture line was not a single stream, but a myriad of rivulets spread over the wide boundary between stagnation and chaos. When they met an obstacle some of the lines went off the scale, but others threaded around or through, and survived to branch again. But as the simulation ran forward, the tangled skein of human cultures converged and interwove into a thick rope.

"That is our underlying problem," she said. "Our civilization has become too uniform. A millennium ago there were hundreds of languages, thousands of cultures, even more world views. Now, we are dangerously converged. The mindset of the Instituts is the norm for all. One truth is everyone's truth. It makes us less adaptable. In a way, we have brought this on ourselves."

"There are advantages to uniformity, or we wouldn't have gotten this way," Gaspard said. "Nowadays, no one kills anyone else who sees the truth a little differently."

"Advantages on the individual scale may not be advantages for the species."

"Yes, but how can we re-diversify?" Gaspard said. "Introduce ethnic

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conflict? Economic polarization? Nationalism? You've got a stronger stomach than I if you can do that." The light from the holo vitrine cast deep shadows on his face.

Naidu felt a longing for simpler times, when she only had to become the Rinpoche to find answers. Her job now was to think as the Rinpoche would have thought. She said, "Perhaps the Redpath phenomenon is our culture's own way of re-diversifying. A natural response to the danger. After all, they have begun by sowing distrust of the Instituts, which are the unifying forces of society."

"The Instituts steer the culture," Gaspard said. "Changes that affect us automatically propagate throughout society. If something creates widespread distrust of us, it could trigger an uncontrolled phase transition."

"You mean a random avalanche. Society could collapse."

"Or, if it can't adapt, cease to be." Gaspard shook his head tensely. "The slightest change in conditions could trigger it. Bad weather, or an unchecked rumor. Not to mention a troop of Redpath demagogues accusing us of secret conspiracies."

Naidu thought of her own simulations of the internal workings of Sorel, and said, "Does Raspail know about this?"

Shaking his head, Gaspard said, "We have enough loose cannons without that."

Naidu looked out at the Earth hanging in the sky like a fragile glass ornament. "I wish we knew what we were doing," she said.

Breakfast the next morning was eaten in silence. Soon after, Raspail and Aristide disappeared into Oracle. This time, the voyant wouldn't even let Dominique past the door.

He spent some time trying out the training disks, but they quickly lost his interest. After ten minutes wandering aimlessly around the apartment, he decided to go down into Oracle, permission or no permission.

Descending the silent rampway, Dominique felt even more vividly the sense of some inconceivable intelligence, aware of him. It was in the still air, in the bland lighting, in the dustless floor. When, halfway down, he heard footsteps ahead, the back of his neck prickled with premonitions, and he darted into one of the empty doorways, listening.

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The footsteps drew closer, but they did not sound like either Raspail's or Aristide's. They were halting, uneven. Dominique waited, trying to still his breath. The closer the steps came the slower they got till Dominique could not stand waiting any longer, and peered out.

It was Aristide after all, but walking drunkenly, veering from side to side, one foot dragging behind the other. When Dominique stepped out into the corridor he said in a slurred voice, "My rescue dog!" The pupil of one eye was dilated, the other normal. He put out a hand to touch the wall, but it was too far away and he teetered. Dominique caught him before he fell.

They made their way together up a ramp that seemed to have turned endless. Aristide kept seeing imaginary precipices at his feet, and Dominique had to coax him across them. By the time they reached the apartment, Aristide had become too terrified to put one foot in front of the other. Dominique had to drag him the last few feet into bed.

It had begun to snow outside. Dominique sat on the edge of his cot, watching the random paths of the flakes in the blustery air, feeling trapped. Suddenly, Aristide sat bolt upright, staring tensely out the window.

"What are those?" he said, pointing.

"Snowflakes," Dominique said.

"No, they're not." All the color seemed drained from Aristide's face. He whispered, "They're maggots. They want to eat my brain."

He scrambled up and began clawing at the door to get out. Dominique tried to coax him back to bed, talking soothingly; but Aristide pushed him away.

"You'll never get her!" Aristide shrieked. "I'll kill you first!" He lunged for Dominique's eyes. Dominique tried to catch his wrists, but now Aristide was fighting ferociously. A vicious kick sent a stab of pain into Dominique's kneecap, and before he could think, his fist went like a piston into the apprentice's stomach. Aristide gasped for breath and fell forward onto his knees, then to the floor.

Afraid that he had done some terrible damage, Dominique dragged the limp body to the bed then bent over, listening for breath. It was several seconds before Aristide gave a ragged gasp, then began breathing evenly. Heart pounding, Dominique settled back to watch.

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Nothing happened for a long time. At last Dominique got up to go into the bathroom. His face had a bloody scratch, and there was some swelling in his knee. He went into the kitchen to get an ice pack, but heard a sound from the bedroom and dashed back.

Aristide was standing wedged into a corner of the room, staring in terror around him. "Is it my blood?" he asked.

"Where?" Dominique said.

"On the walls, on the knives." Aristide grimaced in horror. "Oh my God, it's dripping from the ceiling." He tried to wipe something imaginary from his hair.

"Come on, back to bed. You'll feel better if you sleep."

"No!" Aristide pleaded. "It's all razors. Can't you see where it's cut me?" He held out a perfectly normal hand. "Look, the bone is showing."

"You're okay, there's no razors," Dominique said.

Step by painful step, he led Aristide across the room.

"Don't make me lie down in all that blood." Aristide was staring at his bed, shaking in terror. It made Dominique feel cruel, but he gently pushed Aristide down. His body stiff with revulsion, Aristide looked up into Dominique's face. For an instant, shifting clouds seemed to part, and out of his eyes looked a perfectly lucid person trapped in a malfunctioning mind.

"Something's gone wrong, hasn't it?" he said.

"Try to sleep," Dominique answered. "I'll be right here."

Raspail didn't come back till long after dark. When Dominique heard the hall door, he crept out quietly to talk to her. She was just disappearing into her bedroom when he called out, "Voyant!"

She turned back, one hand on the edge of her door. Her eyes were dark with exhaustion.

"Aristide's sick," Dominique said.

"I know," she answered calmly.

"No, you don't. He's crazy."

She nodded wearily. "It's just part of the training. Whenever he's immersed in Oracle for long, there is a reaction. It goes away. Don't worry about it." She stepped into her room and closed the door.

Dominique stood in the darkened living room, feeling abandoned. Don't worry about it? Easy for her to say.

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He went back into the bedroom, grimly determined to stay on watch through the night. He lit the candle and settled cross-legged on his cot, eyes on Aristide.

Hours later, he was roused from sleep by a strange smell. He pulled himself erect to see Aristide sitting on the edge of his bed, face studiously intent as he held one hand over the candle flame. The smell was cooking flesh.

With a shout, Dominique seized Aristide's wrist. The entire palm was black and smoking. Swearing at himself, Dominique got up to get ice, salve, and bandages. Aristide watched carefully, silent, as he doctored the charred hand.

"Why did you do that?" Dominique demanded angrily, looking Aristide in the eyes. He looked calm and quiet.

"I couldn't feel my hand," Aristide said. "I thought maybe if I held it in the flame, I might feel it. I still can't."

"Well, you will in the morning."

"Why are you angry, Dominique?"

Dominique sighed. "I just don't want you to do that again."

"I won't."

Dominique sat back, vowing to stay awake this time.

By morning, Aristide was sleeping as if drugged. Feeling relieved of a terrible chore, Dominique stretched out his stiff limbs, then got up to go order some strong coffee. He was in the kitchen when he heard the peremptory rap on the hall door. He was coming out to answer it when Raspail came flying from her room and threw the door open. "Gaspard," she said, as if she had known exactly who it was going to be.

"I need to talk to you, Raspail," he said.

"What do we have left to talk about?"

"This is business. Institut business."

With a show of reluctance, she held the door open for him. There was an energy in the air between them, like that between electrodes. They went into the living room, and Dominique ducked back into the kitchen.

Their voices were low at first, and Dominique busied himself washing some dishes to avoid eavesdropping. But presently they began to lose their caution, and he could not avoid hearing.

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"I'm trying to warn you, Raspail," Gaspard said. "The governing committee has lost patience."

"I don't show my work before it is done," Raspail said defensively.

Gaspard gave a low exclamation. "What are you trying to prove? Everyone already knows you're the best voyant alive. You're the only one who wants to hold you back, Raspail."

"We've been through this before."

"All right." He drew a breath. "I won't bring it all up again. The point is, Barrère's data has put the whole Institut in a turmoil. Everyone's clamoring for more studies. And for that, we need more than one voyant."

"You will have more than one. And it will be worth the wait."

"But when?"

"Soon."

"That's not good enough! Don't you know how urgent this is?"

Dominique heard the door to Aristide's room open. Quickly he stepped to the kitchen door to see what was going on. Aristide stood at the entrance to his room, swaying slightly. He looked more waiflike than ever, his eyes huge with shadows in a porcelain face. His attention was riveted on Gaspard.

Raspail was sitting on the couch, legs curled under her. Gaspard sat beside her, bent close. To Dominique's eyes, their body language screamed of the attraction between them.

When Aristide came forward, Gaspard rose.

"Savant Desnoyer," Aristide said. "It's been a long time."

Gaspard was watching him fixedly. "What's the matter, have you been ill?"

Aristide laughed a little giddily. "No. Just working hard to exceed the savants' expectations."

"What happened to your hand?"

Aristide looked down, as if perplexed to find his hand wrapped in bandages. It took a few moments of thought before he said uncertainly, "I...burned it." He looked to Dominique for confirmation. Dominique nodded silently.

Raspail said, "Aristide, Savant Desnoyer came to tell us that the governing committee wants a schedule for Dominique's training."

"Have you decided to make him your apprentice?" Aristide asked.

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"That is not open to question," Gaspard answered.

"Two apprentices is a heavy load," Raspail said.

Aristide said brightly, "Don't worry. Another few months and he can be *my* apprentice."

Not if I have any say, thought Dominique.

Without warning, Gaspard reached out and grasped Aristide's wrist to look at his bandaged hand. Aristide wrenched savagely away. "Don't touch me! You're the one who put the knives in my bed, aren't you?"

Gaspard backed away, staring. "What are you talking about?"

"Get out!" Aristide shrieked. "Get out, before I set my dog on you."

Slowly, Gaspard said, "I'll see you later, Raspail."

When he was gone, Aristide turned anxiously to Raspail. She sat staring at the wall, looking too discouraged to move or speak.

"Let's get back to work," Aristide said.

She looked at him in disbelief. "Are you out of your mind?"

"We can't afford to rest," Aristide said urgently. "Didn't you hear? We have to work harder. I have to be ready."

She rose, her face dark with the presentiment of failure. "I am going down to Oracle. Alone."

When she was gone, Aristide sank into a chair. After a few moments of silence, he looked up at Dominique. "Do you think I won?"

"I don't know," Dominique said.

"He wants her back," said Aristide. "He can't have her. She loves me."

Not in the same way, Dominique thought. She loved Aristide all right, but not as a woman loves a man. And not as a mother loves a child, either. It was something else, something Dominique couldn't quite pinpoint.

"Will you be all right if I leave for a second?" Dominique asked.

Aristide looked as if it were the silliest question in the world. "Of course."

Two seconds later, Dominique was at the door to Oracle.

He found Raspail in the bottom-most operating room, but she was not at the keyboard or in the operator's chair. She sat on a stool by the small glassblower's furnace, staring at the sculpture she had made, twisting its silk cover between her fingers.

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"Now do you believe me?" Dominique said.

"I believed you before," she said.

She still didn't understand. He told her about last night. As she listened, shadows of despondence flickered across her face.

"We are so nearly done," she said, looking at the sculpture. "Yet every change gets harder. We may be against the limit to the elasticity of the mind."

She reached out and ran a finger down one branch of the glass diatom structure. The exquisite tenderness in her gesture brought a realization to Dominique. It was this she loved. This sculpture, this pattern. Not the person it symbolized.

"Is that Aristide's?" he asked.

"Not yet," she said. "Almost."

She went to the holo vitrine and put on the headnet. The display lit up with a diatom graph that looked like the pattern for the sculpture, or vice versa. A few small strands flashed red. "Those are the only ones still to go," she said.

It was a strange-looking graph, with none of the symmetry Dominique had seen in the sculptures of the salle des cerveaux. Its core was tangled, angular, rebelling against limits. Gradually, toward the outside, the jutting structure was disciplined into a thin veneer of Bernaud pattern. The graph had a weird, unsettling beauty. It reminded Dominique of something he couldn't quite place.

"It is in randomness that creativity lies," Raspail said. "Nothing new will ever exist without it. To make chaos is the most difficult, and the most profoundly creative act a human can perform."

Her eyes on the glass sculpture burned with the afterglow of inspiration. "We must learn to imagine what has never been imagined before. To think anew."

It came to Dominique then what the graph reminded him of. And with that, a pattern fell into place.

He left Raspail still staring at her sculpture and climbed the ramp. Halfway up, he felt behind his ear for the chip the Rinpoche's Voice had given him. He pressed his thumb against it to send the signal.

He understood now what was going on. The savants hadn't seen the pattern because the crucial data was folded into the obscure dimension of the human heart.

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Chapter 3

When Dominique reached the hallway, he decided not to go back to the apartment. Instead, he turned the other way and soon found himself exploring Sorel.

Right, then left, then right again — he hoped he would remember the way back, but didn't slow down. A door took his interest and he opened it — then stopped in confusion, for he was in the same distorted room where he had met the Rinpoche's Voice when he first arrived at Sorel. And there she was, waiting for him.

"Thank you for coming, Dominique," she said. He realized then that his trek through the building had not been his own choice, but carefully guided. He had just been operated by someone else, so subtly he had not even noticed. Automatically, his finger rose to the chip behind his ear. So it was more than just a communication device — it was an incredibly small DI link. He decided to get rid of it as soon as he could.

"What is it that made you wish to speak with me?" the Rinpoche's Voice said.

"I was down in Oracle's control room," he began.

"Yes," she said, in a tone so unsurprised that it struck him she could have been watching through his eyes. Everything he had done, everything he had seen, could have been observed. This time he had to restrain himself from reaching up and peeling the chip away.

"I saw Aristide's diatom graph," he said.

"Yes," she said again. A statement. So she *had* been watching, or recording it all without his permission. The thought outraged him. No wonder everyone in this place spoke in acrostics, never knowing when they might be overheard. Well, so would he.

"Riddle it out yourself," he said. "I've given you the clue. If you're so wise it shouldn't be hard."

He turned and left then, on his own volition this time.

When Raspail read the summons later that day, her face had a look of quiet desperation. She closed her eyes and drew a long, uneven breath before telling Dominique and Aristide that they had all been ordered to a meeting with the Rinpoche.

Dominique had not expected the Rinpoche's response to be so

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impersonal, or so threatening. He watched Raspail disappear into her bedroom to wait for the appointed time, and felt like a secret traitor.

Aristide was huddled in the window seat. Dominique settled down beside him, and followed his gaze out across the wintry valley to where a storm cloud was blundering its way toward the west face of Mont Chatoyer.

"I've seen that a thousand times," Aristide said. "The clouds are always smashing into the mountain, but the mountain always wins."

"Why is she so worried about this?" Dominique said.

"They're going to find out what we are doing," Aristide said.

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"They'll try to stop us. They don't *want* a phase transition, Dominique. It's too risky. At least the order crisis is safe."

"There's something I don't understand," Dominique said. "What do *you* get out of this, Aristide?"

"Get?" Aristide looked as if the question were insane. "I get to be the most important person in Raspail's life."

Hesitantly, Dominique said, "I'm not trying to pry, Aristide, but do you think she really loves you?" Just make him think, make him question: that was all Dominique wanted.

"I *know* it," Aristide said, his eyes intense. "You've never been in Oracle; how could you know? There, we *become* each other. I've been inside her, all the way. I've seen through her eyes, thought through her brain. We're interwoven till there is no me or her, just a single stream of both of us."

"Is that healthy?" Dominique said.

"I don't care. If it's not, I don't want to be healthy."

When he saw Dominique's unsettled expression, Aristide said, "I could show you, Dominique. If you would just link up with me, I could take you into Oracle with us, and then you would understand."

Shifting uncomfortably, Dominique rubbed behind his ear where the chip was still fixed to his skin. He had been unable to get it off. It was reminding him that he had had quite enough of being controlled. "I don't like mind sharing," he said.

"Then you've never had a really skillful operator. It can be good. It can be unbelievable." Aristide's voice trailed away as his mind strayed. "But

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maybe some people just aren't suited for it. That was what broke up Raspail and Gaspard, you know. They tried to merge in Oracle, and found out more than they wanted to know about each other. *Their* relationship was built on illusion, and couldn't survive real intimacy. Ours isn't."

Dominique watched him, thinking that the ultimate mystery of Sorel lay inside Aristide's mind. It was a place he had no intention of going, ever again.

THE RINPOCHE'S CHAMBERS lay at the very summit of Sorel. The three visitors climbed a helical staircase that started in a wide, gracious sweep around a central courtyard, but wound tighter with every flight, like a spring increasing in tension. By the end they went in a dizzy single file with only a metal pole at the center of the spiral. Dominique was sure they had climbed long enough to pierce the top of Sorel's tallest tower and into the sky.

In fact, the Rinpoche's room seemed to be situated in the sky; from the large windows Dominique could see beyond the Vaudry Range to Neige Valley, and the mouth of the Rive-Argent. Then the view moved, as if the room were turning in the wind, and Dominique looked away to avoid vertigo. The chamber was furnished with ascetic simplicity: a mat over a bare stone floor, a washstand, and a terminal with holo vitrine displaying a changing mandala. On pillows at one end of the room sat a group of people in saffron dhouras.

As Raspail approached, the savants rose in respect from their pillows. Raspail exchanged guarded nods with them. One was an elderly, sharp-faced woman with uncombed gray hair falling around her shoulders; another was a bald, round-faced Buddha of a man. The third was Gaspard.

The Rinpoche's Voice was there as well; Dominique was almost certain that she was being operated this time, since her face had the seamless, serene quality of an ancient statue. In a light, untroubled voice she said, "Welcome, Voyant Raspail. I have invited Savants Barrère, Lalande, and Desnoyer to join our discussion because Oracle is so critical to their work."

They all settled down on pillows again. At a nod from the Rinpoche's Voice, Gaspard opened the meeting without any preliminary pleasantries.

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"We all know what a critical time this is. Raspail's analysis of Barrère's data has proved that a phase transition is imminent. In order to act, we need information: and to get information we need Oracle operating at full capacity again."

Dominique glanced around at all the faces. This was not what he had expected.

Raspail sat with her back absolutely straight, her expression remote. "I will do all I can to cooperate," she said. "I can go to two shifts."

She already looked haggard. Gaspard said, more gently than before, "That's not the answer, Raspail. The answer is to have more voyants."

"You will have another, very soon," Raspail said.

There was a silence. "We will if you cooperate," Gaspard said at last. "Savants Lalande and Barrère have not yet seen the extraordinary opportunity that has come our way." He rose then, and went to the keyboard that controlled the holo vitrine. "Savants, this is the diatom graph of Dominique Cadot."

There was a stir of intaken breath when the vitrine lit up. Dominique leaned forward, understanding now what they saw, what he had not known the first time. The graph was an almost perfect Bernaud diagram.

"I don't believe it," Lalande said. "They are supposed to be extinct in nature."

"Obviously not," Gaspard said. "What most voyants need years of training to achieve, Dominique has as a gift. This graph is the most perfectly adapted to Oracle that I have ever seen."

They all turned to look at him. Dominique felt himself going red. He glanced at Raspail. Her face looked frozen.

The Rinpoche's Voice said, "How has he worked out, Raspail? Is his performance as good as his graph?"

"I have not had time to test him," she said stiffly. "I have been too busy."

Silence settled in again, colder than before. Raspail said defensively, "Aristide's training is at a critical phase. I could not drop it just like that."

The older woman, Barrère, broke in, "You have been using that excuse for four years, Raspail. I think I speak for most of the east wing

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when I say, our patience is used up. Now you have a real candidate, a candidate you can't fail with. The time has come for Aristide to graduate, or leave. He is holding you back."

They didn't understand. Dominique shifted on his cushion. Why couldn't they see the pattern?

"He will graduate, very soon," Raspail said. "He is almost ready."

"What does 'almost ready' mean? Show us his graph."

Raspail stiffened, and Aristide glanced at her apprehensively.

"I have not shown my design before," Raspail said. "I thought you would find it...unexpected. Surprising."

"What do you mean, 'your design?'" Gaspard said.

Reluctantly, Raspail rose and went to the holo vitrine. At the touch of her fingers, Dominique's simple, symmetrical graph faded, and Aristide's exploded into being, straining at its bounds, wrestling with itself. The savants leaned forward, drawn and repulsed by it. Raspail watched their reaction closely, a defiant smile growing on her face.

"I wouldn't call it beautiful," Barrère said, fascinated.

"A departure from tradition," the Rinpoche's Voice said, looking at the savants. "But what is wrong with that?"

"You asked how close we are to completion," Raspail said. "I will show you." She superimposed another graph on the screen. There was very little difference.

Barrère and Lalande gave exclamations of surprise. Raspail looked elated. But Gaspard was frowning, his hand stroking his beard fast.

"Except that is not Aristide's graph," he said.

Raspail's face iced over again.

"I have seen Aristide's graph," Gaspard went on. "I can't remember the details, but this is not it. I don't know what this is; it scarcely looks human. I'll show you the closest thing to it." He went to the holo and split the display, calling up a second image for comparison. It was the graph Dominique had seen in the salle des cerveaux. "Type Q psychosis," Gaspard said. "The textbook model."

There was no denying the resemblance. Dominique felt Aristide tense at his side, like an animal preparing to flee.

Unexpectedly, Raspail laughed. "You're not telling us anything we didn't know, Gaspard," she said. "Aristide and I knew we were treading

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on the edge of danger. It made the work exceedingly delicate. But the rewards are overwhelming."

Gaspard was frowning in perplexity. "Then this *is* his graph?"

"It is."

"Show me his original graph again."

"It's not relevant," Raspail snapped.

"I confess," said the Rinpoche's Voice calmly, "I also would like to see it."

Raspail looked as if the walls were lurching closer around her. She turned to the keyboard, and her fingers pounded furiously. The display dissolved and was replaced.

"My God," Gaspard said.

There was no resemblance at first glance. It was an ordinary graph, with none of the jarring beauty of the other.

The room was quiet. Only the Rinpoche's Voice looked unperturbed. "Raspail," she said, "how many alterations have you made?"

She swept them with an unapologetic gaze. "Five hundred and seventy-two."

Their faces looked frozen.

Raspail touched the keyboard and the display sprang to life, showing the sequence of changes she had made. It was like a chain reaction, starting at the center and working out. The image twinkled, collapsed, and was reborn from within. The savants watched, mesmerized, until the ordinary graph had been transformed into Raspail's design.

Gaspard looked shaken. "This is not training," he said. "You have made a new person."

"Yes," she said. "A person unlike any that has ever lived."

The Rinpoche's Voice looked at Aristide. "Is Raspail right? Five hundred and seventy-two?"

"I wasn't counting," Aristide said.

"Did you consent to this?"

"Of course," he said. "Before, I was just an ordinary person. She has made me more. Her design is inspired, a masterpiece. I would do it all again."

"We can't accept that testimony," Gaspard burst out. "This is scarcely a person anymore. Every reaction in him has been created to serve

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Raspail's purposes. Do you think she would have left him any will to object? It would have jeopardized her scheme."

"That's not true!" Raspail strafed him with a look.

Gaspard's voice was steely. "This is a ghastly experiment. No human being has the right to alter another one this way. We have to stop it now."

"You can't do that," Raspail said, stepping instinctively closer to the holo vitrine, as if to protect the image in it.

"How can you defend this?" Gaspard said. "You're not talking to innocents here. We all know what it takes to make alterations this severe." He looked at Aristide, then away, as if the sight were too horrible. "God, to think I used to be afraid you were lovers! I only wish now it were that simple. Seven years... What exactly is he to you, Raspail? Your slave? Your victim?"

"He is my art work," she said softly.

Aristide gave a wild laugh. "You've lost, Gaspard! Just admit it, why don't you? You'll never understand us. We've shared things you can't even imagine."

There was a reckless look in Raspail's eyes that was at least partly vengeful. "Yes," she said to Gaspard, "Through him, I have seen things no one else could. His experiences are more vivid than you could imagine; his sensations are acute enough to take your breath away."

Grimly, Gaspard said, "You have mind shared, then."

"You can't imagine how exhilarating it was," she said with a smile like cyanide.

"To go into madness and come out again unharmed, you mean?" Gaspard said.

"To be in a mind completely compatible with mine."

"Of course it is! You made it that way. You couldn't love a genuine person, so you had to create one."

"You're just jealous, Gaspard," Aristide broke in. "You've never had anyone inhabit you the way she's inhabited me." He looked around at the other savants with amused disdain. "And the rest of you. I bet you think it's funny to make your eyes float up like that. Well, balloons don't scare me anymore. My needles can shine brighter than you can see."

Dominique caught his arm. "Shut up, Aristide!" he hissed.

Aristide froze, as if realizing he had made a terrible mistake.

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The top of Savant Lalande's bald head was sprouting sweat. "This is an abomination," he said.

Gaspard had recovered control of his voice. Quietly, he said, "The only humane thing is to try and repair some of the damage Raspail has done."

"You're not going to touch him," Raspail said fiercely.

"For God's sake, Raspail!" Gaspard said. "Do you know what the world would think of this? If they knew we were abusing the technology like this, the Instituts would be pariahs. It would confirm all the Redpaths' worst accusations."

"Now we see your real concern," she said bitterly. "You want to prevent bad publicity."

"I want to prevent a great deal more than that," he said. "If the Redpaths could prove a piece of information like this, they could trigger events that would destroy our civilization."

Raspail didn't look as shaken as the others did. There was a craftiness in her voice as she said, "Then don't let the Redpaths know. Let me continue with my plan. As I said, his training is almost done."

"Make him a voyant?" Lalande said incredulously.

"You must be joking," Gaspard said. "We can't let Aristide operate Oracle. This graph is completely incompatible with it. The risk is appalling."

Dominique watched Raspail, expecting her to speak, but though her jaw worked she still said nothing. Unable to stand it, Dominique blurted out, "You don't understand, do you? He *has* been operating Oracle. For years now. Where do you think your great discoveries have been coming from?"

The savants turned to Raspail. She gazed over all their heads, ominous as a chained thundercloud.

"You said they were your discoveries, Raspail," Barrère said.

"I brought them back from chaos," she replied, as if speaking in a dream. "It's true, the graph is incompatible. I made it that way. Oracle fights him every moment he is in it. It has come seconds from destroying him. But it is from that conflict his insights arise. If he were suited to it, he would see only what we do. As it is, his mind is like lightning, illuminating in flashes. Sometimes the light shows nothing. Sometimes it shows everything."

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She looked down then, focusing on them. "Yes, he's operated Oracle. He's been farther into it than anyone before him. Aristide is not trapped in our narrow confines of thinking. While we cling to the anchors of our sanity, he sails free, imagining things that have never been imagined before. He can already work in seven spatial dimensions, and three of time. He can see across the border into the next realm of reality. He is the one who will lead us into the phase transition. He will perceive a new world into being."

Her voice turned bitter. "But all you care about is your narrow ideas of sanity and good taste. Why do I bother? You don't want to see new worlds."

She turned as if no one else were in the room, and went to the door. When Aristide saw she was leaving, he sprang up to follow her. Dominique hesitated a moment, glancing back at the stiff faces of the savants, then followed his friends.

"I'm sorry," Dominique panted when they reached the bottom of the staircase. "I didn't know it would turn out like that. I didn't know they would — "

"It's not your fault," Raspail said. "This has been inevitable since we began." She put a hand on Aristide's shoulder and looked into his face. Dominique recognized that look now: it was the love of an artist for her work.

"They will try to mutilate you," she said to Aristide. "They will try to undo what I have done, to hide the evidence and calm their consciences."

"I won't let them," Aristide said.

"They can make you want it."

"No, they can't. I only want what you want. They'd have to take me apart to change that."

Raspail's shoulders hunched under some invisible weight. "They couldn't take you apart more than I have done already," she whispered. She turned away, needled into motion by her thoughts, and crossed the courtyard toward an empty corridor leading to the west wing. Once out of sight of the stairway, she turned again to Aristide, her face burning with conflict.

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"I never should have touched you," she said. "It was wrong."

"You created a new art form," Aristide said. "No one has ever worked in the medium of mind before."

Her laugh sounded like a whetstone on a blade. "I'm an artist like a vivisectionist is, cutting apart a living thing to reassemble it in a pretty design of veins and eyes, its heart still beating."

Dominique could tell she wanted someone to contradict her. Before Aristide could draw breath to do it, and continue their strange charade of mutual delusion, he said, "If you felt that way, why did you do it?"

She looked at him, jarred. "He wanted me to." She turned to Aristide. "You did, didn't you?"

For an instant Aristide hesitated. Raspail cried out, "Didn't you?"

"Of course!" Aristide said. "I wanted it for you. To achieve your plan."

She stared at him a moment, then turned urgently to Dominique. "You have to help us, Dominique. The savants will come after him as soon as they talk it out. Get Aristide out of here, away from Sorel. You know the world outside. You can find a place where he'll be safe, can't you?"

"I guess so..." Dominique stammered.

She turned to Aristide. "Go with him. Get away from here. You are precious to me, Aristide. I have to know you are safe."

Aristide didn't move. Raspail pushed him toward Dominique. "Go on, go with Dominique. Get away from us all. Go. Live."

"Come on, Aristide," Dominique said, taking his arm. This time, his instincts and Raspail's agreed. The best thing to do was to get away.

Aristide followed him like a robot. Dominique hurried out into the courtyard again, in the direction he thought the exit lay. They ducked into a doorway and turned left down a crooked corridor, then right, then right again, then left. By the time Dominique realized that all the corridors looked exactly the same, he was completely disoriented.

"Where are you going?" Aristide asked.

"I don't know," Dominique said. "Where are we?"

"In the rootnet. It's like a maze."

"Oh, great." Sorel had caught them again. Dominique tried to remember the turns he had made, and which way he was heading. He heard footsteps somewhere — were they behind or ahead? "Oh, damn," he said.

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Then something occurred to him. "Aristide, do you know the way through?"

"Of course," Aristide said.

"Well, why didn't you say so?"

"Where are we going?"

"To the door. Away from Sorel."

They set out again, Aristide leading this time. They quickly passed through the maze, then through a room whose floor circled like water going down a drain, then around a corner and straight into Gaspard Desnoyer.

Gaspard caught Aristide by the wrist. "I thought this was what Raspail would do," he said grimly. "It's frightening how I know her."

"Get your hands off me," Aristide said, struggling. Gaspard laughed.

"Let him go," Dominique said ominously. He was bigger than the savant, and willing to bet he was stronger, too. Gaspard stared at him, and took a step back.

"What do you care about this quarrel?" he said.

"I'm taking Aristide away," Dominique said implacably.

"Do you think we intend to let the evidence of Raspail's experiment beyond these walls?"

Dominique crossed his arms and took a step closer. "Aristide's not evidence. He's a human being."

"Are you sure of that?" Gaspard said.

"I may not be a clever savant, but there are some things I know. This is one of them. He deserves what we all do — a chance to be what he chooses."

Gaspard's eyes fell before Dominique's stare. He cleared his throat.

"Now let us go before any more harm happens," Dominique said.

Biting his lower lip, Gaspard let go of Aristide's wrist. "Promise you won't let anyone know what you've learned here," he said to Dominique.

"I won't."

Aristide stood like a statue, staring at Gaspard. "Well, go on!" the savant said angrily. "Don't give me a chance to change my mind."

Side by side, Dominique and Aristide dashed down the hall. There was a doorway at the other end; Dominique burst through it into sunlight. The snow was melting from the courtyard; all the gutters were atrickle,

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and bright rivulets ran across the paving bricks. The sky was brushed with clouds like wings. "Come on!" he yelled, giving a flying leap of exhilaration.

Aristide stood in the doorway, blinking through his hair like some nocturnal creature thrust under surgical lights. He peered out into the mountain air, then drew back again.

"What's the matter?" Dominique said, glancing around. It wouldn't be long before others discovered their whereabouts, and he couldn't count on everyone to have Gaspard's conscience.

"I can't," Aristide said. He tried to take a step into the sunlight, but jerked back, shaking. He braced himself, hands on the doorjambs. "It's too big out there," he said.

Dominique forced back his impatience. "There's nothing dangerous out here, Aristide. Back there is where the danger is. Let's go."

Visibly steeling himself, Aristide took three steps out into the courtyard.

As Dominique turned to lead the way, a wave of terror smashed down on him. He crouched like an animal on the pavement. The sky yawned above him, a huge, devouring cavity. He felt small, microbe-small, dwarfed by every brick and raindrop. Desperately, he looked around for something human-scale, and saw the door. Safety. He dashed toward it.

"Dominique?" Aristide knelt beside him as he cowered in the doorway, panting. He felt odd, unlike himself.

"I can't do it," he said. The words sounded distant. His heart was racing, and his skin tingled with aftershocks of fear.

"They've got you, too," Aristide said. "Of course. They want you, and your damned perfect graph. They're not going to let you go."

Dominique's hand rose to his ear, where the chip rested against his skull. He tried again to peel it off, but couldn't even get a fingernail under the corner.

Anger replaced the fear. They were controlling him, making him into something he wasn't meant to be, just like Aristide.

He fished out his pocket knife and put the blade behind his ear. Gritting his teeth, he sliced away a flap of skin, the chip still attached. He threw the bloody thing to the pavement and ground it into a puddle with his heel. A warm trickle ran down his neck. He swore, grimacing.

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"Let's go," he said.

The snow had melted from the roadways, and the village of Sous-Sorel was alive again. Dominique hadn't realized how accustomed he had become to seeing people masked in eyephones till he noticed that no one on the streets wore them.

He had half expected to be met by someone ready to take them back up the mountain; but there was no sign of any alarm or pursuit. He wondered if Gaspard had covered for them. Or perhaps it was just that, despite its many powers, Sorel was like any other academic institution, better able to debate what to do than to actually do it.

At the hotel they learned that the bus wasn't coming for an hour. Dominique used the public booth in the lobby to place a call home for money. He recorded the message and chose a time-delay transmission. He didn't want to have to answer his mother's questions.

While waiting for the fund transfer, Dominique went into the bathroom to mop the blood off his neck and bandage the cut, wincing. When he came out he found Aristide staring out the window at the street, mesmerized. He looked like he scarcely believed what was happening.

"Has it been a long time since you've been outside Sorel?" Dominique asked.

"I've never been outside Sorel," Aristide said.

Of course. The person who had been outside Sorel was someone else. Memories of that person would have threatened Raspail's plan. She couldn't have left them intact.

"So what do you think of it?" Dominique said.

"It's so elaborate. I can't figure out why they spent the time to create all this. What kind of data structure does it symbolize?"

He thought it was an elaborate synthetic experience. "This is real, Aristide," Dominique said.

"How can you tell?"

"Well...I just can."

"But it looks like it's all built up from equations. Pretty simple ones, too."

"I guess it is."

The clerk was watching them. It made Dominique nervous, so he took Aristide's arm and led him outside. As they walked down the street,

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Aristide kept stopping to stare at sights like a dog, a door handle, and a hanging sign.

They passed the bookstore. Looking in the window, Dominique saw a man in eyephones come out from the back room with an armload of books. When he flipped up the shades, Dominique realized it was Gabriel.

"So? I've got a job here," Gabriel said a little testily when Dominique came in, Aristide trailing behind. "Is that such an amazing thing?"

"No. Are you staying, then?"

"Why not? I can read everything the savants can read, and down here I can keep an open mind about it."

He had that "it was all my choice" tone he habitually used to elevate every setback into an ideological triumph. It had always driven Dominique crazy.

"Did they decide they didn't want you after all?" Gabriel said, stacking books.

Hesitating slightly, Dominique said, "Yeah. It wasn't a good match."

Aristide said at his side, "How can you be sure it doesn't represent a problem we're supposed to solve?"

He meant reality. "Maybe it does, Aristide," Dominique said. "Maybe it represents a whole lot of them." He explained to Gabriel, "This is Aristide. I met him up at Sorel."

"Hello," Aristide said.

"Are you an acolyte?" Gabriel asked, poised to be offended at any sign of condescension.

"No, I'm a voyant. The savants kicked me out because they thought I might start a phase transition."

Dominique stepped on his foot. But Gabriel's attention was on something outside. "What are the Institut guards doing down here?" he said.

Dominique pushed Aristide down behind a book rack, then crouched out of sight, motioning at Gabriel, who was staring. "Look normal," he hissed.

Gabriel's eyes followed something outside; then he joined them behind the book rack, frowning. "What's going on?" he said. "Is it you they're looking for?"

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"Gabe, do you have a back room or some place where we could stay out of sight, just till the bus comes?"

"You really are in trouble," Gabriel said wonderingly. "Don't worry, Dominique. We can help you. I've got to tell Derosier." He headed for the back room. Dominique peered over the top of the book rack. There was a vehicle parked down the street, and two people in gray dhouras by it. They didn't seem to be looking this way.

He wondered if he was overreacting. There was such a thing as the law. Sorel couldn't exactly kidnap two unwilling people in front of the whole town.

Or could they?

Aristide was watching him. "Do you really know a place that's safe?" he said, as if he'd never believed it in the first place.

"Sure," Dominique said, trying to feel confident. "Once we're home in the Neige Valley, everything will be okay." He tried to imagine Raspail's exotic creation amid his down-to-earth family. His mother would never let him forget bringing home this particular stray.

Gabriel was gesturing from the back room. Crouched over to keep out of sight, Dominique and Aristide made their way to the door.

The back room was a wilderness of photonic equipment, some of it more advanced than even Dominique's mother had in her shop. The bookseller was there, eyephones pushed up on his forehead, looking suspicious.

"Just what I needed, two delinquents leading the savants right to my door," he said. "What did you do, steal office supplies?"

"They wouldn't send guards to hunt down pencils, Derosier," Gabriel said. "That one's the voyant." There was a hard edge to his voice that Dominique had never heard before. Like disappointment crystallized into a purpose.

The bookseller eyed Aristide. "Why are they after you?"

"Don't answer," Dominique said.

That seemed to be answer enough. "Just think, Derosier," Gabriel said. "A voyant would know how to access Oracle. We could get into the heart of their system."

"You don't want that, Gabriel," Dominique said. "Believe me. It's dangerous. It's evil, what you can do with their technology."

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"No technology is intrinsically evil," Gabriel said.

"Oh, give it a rest," the bookseller said. Then, to Dominique, "I'll see if we can help you." He pushed down his eyephones.

Gabriel had shifted position so he was blocking the door. He looked like a stranger. Dominique said, "I can handle this, Gabriel. We just need to get to the bus."

"The bus? With all the power of Sorel after you, you think you can get away on a bus?" he laughed. "Believe me, you need our help."

I don't want your help, Dominique thought. He looked around the crowded room for another door. There was only a small window, high on the wall.

Derosier flipped up his eyeshades and looked fixedly at Aristide. "Got that?" he said to the ether; Dominique realized he'd been transmitting the image. Now every Redpath on the net would know Aristide by sight.

The bookseller's expression had changed. "There's a vehicle on the way," he said. "It seems there has been unusual activity at Sorel for the past hour. I'm always the last to know."

"We don't need a vehicle," Dominique said.

"I think you do," Derosier answered. "Where did you think you were going to hide from them? We've got safe places."

The Neige Valley was seeming farther and farther away.

Derosier was distracted by another call on his headnet; he flipped down his eyeshades. At the same time they heard the front door open out in the shop, and voices.

"Hide," Gabriel whispered to Dominique. "I'll stall them." He slipped out into the shop.

Dominique headed for the window. It unfastened with a simple latch. He glanced back; Derosier was still distracted behind his eyephones. "Here, I'll boost you up," Dominique whispered to Aristide. "Meet me at the hotel. Don't let the guards see you." He cupped his hands for Aristide's foot, then lifted him up till he could slither through the narrow window.

Footsteps approached. Dominique dived behind a shelf unit crammed with old imagers.

"Sacré!" a man's voice said. "Look at all this equipment. Do you have a license for this stuff?"

"License, my ass," Derosier retorted. "I don't need a license." A

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heated, legalistic argument ensued. In the end, if the man had ever intended to search the room, he was thoroughly distracted.

Gabriel peered around the edge of the shelving. "It's safe now," he said. "Derosier's still yelling at him out on the street. Where's your friend?"

"He had to go," Dominique said.

Looking around, Gabriel spied the unlatched window. "Dominique, you idiot!" he cried out. "You ruin everything!" He hurried out to fetch Derosier.

Dominique dragged a table under the window and climbed up on it. It was a tighter squeeze for him than for Aristide; for a moment he thought he would get stuck. The Institut guards would have to pry him out. He gave a button-popping wrench and was through.

He landed in a mound of slush in a graveled alley; a dog barked at him from the fenced yard across the way. He looked both ways down the alley; the only sign of life was a man piling crates of produce into a truck down the block. Dominique headed toward the hotel.

There was a service entrance at the rear; as Dominique mounted the steps to it, there was a rustle and Aristide emerged from underneath. "Come on inside," Dominique said. "The bus will be here any minute."

"You've both got messages," the clerk said incuriously when they got back into the lobby. She was filing her nails. "You want to take them in the booth?"

Dominique hesitated, then said, "Sure." He wedged into the booth and slapped on the headnet. The message was from his mother, demanding more information before she sent an ecu. Apparently, Gabriel hadn't called her and she was hopping mad at both of them. Dominique cut it off halfway through.

Aristide took his place in the booth, while Dominique stood guard. As the clerk finished her nails, something seemed to dawn on her, and she said, "You know, there are some Institut guards looking for you."

"Thanks, I know," Dominique said.

Aristide emerged looking shaken. "I've got to go back," he said in a whisper.

"Why? Who was it?" Dominique asked.

"Raspail. She's changed her mind. She wants me back."

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And yet he didn't move; his whole body was tensed in revulsion.

Dominique said, "You don't have to go back if you don't want to."

"Yes, I do."

"No. You've got a choice."

"This *is* my choice."

Of course. He had been designed that way.

Outside the window, Dominique could see the bus coming down the street. Freedom on four wheels. For a moment he thought about forcing Aristide on it for his own good. But that wasn't right either. He said, "Aristide, I don't think you ought to go back. But it's up to you. Just think: what do you really want?"

"What Raspail wants," Aristide said.

The bus pulled up, its brakes hissing. Only then did it occur to Dominique that he had told Gabriel he was taking the bus; it was the first place the Redpaths would look. "Damn!" he said under his breath.

On the other hand, it was just possible that, if they could re-enter Sorel unnoticed, they might hide out till the furor died down, in the last place anyone would look.

"Come on," Dominique said, and headed for the back door again.

They were about to step out when a gray land rover sped down the alley. Dominique pushed Aristide back and ducked out of sight. When the coast was clear they slipped out. Down the alley, the man Dominique had seen loading groceries was still at work.

"You going up to the Institut with that?" Dominique asked when they drew near. The man nodded. "We'll help you load if you'll give us a ride up," Dominique said.

"Sure," the man answered.

Soon they were pulling out onto the main street, past a parked Institut vehicle. They turned uphill. Dominique leaned forward to look up at the jagged Institut buildings, wondering if he was doing the right thing. As if in answer, the wound behind his ear began to smart.

The delivery truck turned off the main road onto a lane that led to a broad loading dock built into the side of the mountain. The massive gray doors lifted and they drove in.

The loading dock was cavernous and empty. A stock room man gestured them to stack the crates on a pallet. Dominique and Aristide busied themselves lifting groceries till the driver and attendant disap-

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peared into an office to settle the bill of lading. Then Aristide made for a metal door. He was back in his own reality now, and perfectly confident where he was going. Dominique followed.

They headed for the west wing. Back down the hallway of a thousand doors they raced; Aristide wrenched open the dust-seal doors and plunged down the curving ramp into Oracle's brain.

When they burst into the control room, Raspail was standing by the glass sculpture. She saw Aristide, and her face lit up with mixed joy and desperation. She didn't embrace him; she held him at arm's length, her eyes feasting on his presence.

"I made a mistake to send you away," she said. "You need to be where you belong." She had the look of a relapsed addict. Dominique felt a wave of misgiving.

With a single finger, she touched Aristide's face. "You've always said yes to whatever I wanted to do. Will you say yes one more time?"

Aristide's eyes strayed to the operator's couch, then back to Raspail's face. Dominique said, "You don't have to agree, Aristide."

Raspail's eyes never wavered from her creation. "In Oracle, you'll be safe. Once you are installed in the machine, they can't touch you. The phase transition will go on."

"Think, Aristide," Dominique said. "She doesn't love you; she loves having created you."

"Get out of here," Raspail snapped at him. "You've been their tool from the start."

"Just a second," Dominique said hotly. "I never pulled apart anyone's mind and put it back together all wrong."

"Don't blame Dominique," Aristide said earnestly. "He's only a dog."

Dominique took Aristide's arm. "Come on, Aristide. We'll come back later."

Angrily, Aristide shook off Dominique's hand. "You don't get it, Dominique," he said. "I don't want to be me. I want to be the person she loves."

He clasped hands with Raspail, as if to arm wrestle.

"Go away now, Dominique," she said softly. "Leave us be."

His first impulse was to obey, to back off and leave them. But as soon as he had passed through the door he stopped, mistrusting his own judgment. Nothing they did was their own concern; it affected everyone.

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He dashed up the long ramp, desperate to find someone else, someone able to decide. When he burst breathless out of the airlock doors, Gaspard Desnoyer was just entering the voyant's apartment.

"Savant! You've got to come!" Dominique panted.

Gaspard stopped in surprise. "Dominique! What are you doing here?"

"We had to come back. The Redpaths found out, then Raspail changed her mind."

"Is Aristide here, too?"

"Yes. They're down in the control room. She's going to do something, Savant. I don't know what."

Gaspard strode past him, grim-faced.

When they entered the control room, Raspail and Aristide lay side by side in the operator's chair, their heads together, temples touching. The wavering discontinuity of a DI bubble engulfed their skulls. Through the heat-wave shimmer Dominique could see an absent, otherworldly expression on their faces.

They had escaped into Oracle. Into their private world where no one could follow.

"Did she say what she was doing?" Gaspard demanded.

"Installing him on the machine," Dominique answered.

"Damn!"

"Why?"

Gaspard quickly sat down at a keyboard. Symbols flitted across the screen. He stared at them intently. "She's disabled the controls, locked us out. I'll have to notify the other Instituts to quarantine Oracle till we can get another voyant in to stop her."

As he typed furiously, the screen went blank. He hit the desktop with his fists, swearing. "She's cut us off!"

"Why? What's going on?" Dominique said.

Gaspard turned to stare at Raspail's face as if seeing a new pattern. "Once that noetic structure gets loose in Oracle, it could corrupt the whole system. And if it gets transmitted to the other Instituts..." He clenched his fists. "Damn her! She *wants* an uncontrolled phase transition."

"What about Aristide?" Dominique asked. It seemed to be the question no one cared about.

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"I hope he likes it in Oracle," Gaspard said grimly. "If she has her way, he's never going to make it out alive."

Suddenly, Gaspard crossed the room to the empty couch, and bent over to check the DI mechanism on it. "She's left it on! She knows there's no one here who can use it. Except..." He looked piercingly at Dominique.

"I've never been in Oracle," Dominique said, backing away.

"You've got the Bernaud pattern. You could survive."

"I wouldn't know where to start."

"Just find her. Contact her. See if she'll listen. It's the only thing we can do, Dominique."

Dominique's scalp hurt like fire where he had cut the chip away. This is my choice, he thought, staring at the empty couch. He didn't care about Sorel, or phase transitions. But to lock Aristide inside Oracle, never to escape...

Without stopping to think, he climbed onto the couch and lay back. "You operate it just like a normal helmet," Gaspard said. Dominique closed his eyes and breathed to evoke the alpha waves that triggered it.

AT FIRST HE COULD MAKE no sense at all of the jumble of colors: there was no clue to what was far, what near, or which portions connected to any other. Meaningless detail, everywhere. He spun around, bodiless, with the odd impression he was looking every direction at once. All the possible scenes were superimposed upon each other.

He spied a boundary amid the shifting mass of pixels, the first hint of structure he had seen. He tried to focus on it, to ignore everything else, so it would resolve into a form. As he stared, other pieces of data began to accrete around it, to connect.

It was a glowing geometrical tree. And yet it was like an inside-out image; where he should have seen the surfaces of leaves, he saw openings — a tree of tiny caves in space. Focusing on one of the leaves, he saw that inside it were more caves, complex with stalactites that were themselves openings into other caves. A sense of infinite interiority barraged his mind; the whole world began oscillating between in and out. He struggled in panic against the torrent of input. All the information in the universe was hurtling toward him and away in the same motion; he was going to

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be crushed in an immense collision.

Darkness wrapped him. There was a calm force nearby, holding him, allowing him to see nothing. Far off in his body, he could feel his racing heart begin to slow.

"How did you get here?" He did not exactly hear the words; they were almost pressed into his body. He recognized their source instinctively: Raspail. It was she who had intervened, given him the ability not to see.

Slowly, a form coalesced in front of him: Raspail in human shape, but younger, less worldworn than in life, as if she had not updated the symbol in many years.

"How did you get here?" she asked again.

"You told me to protect Aristide," Dominique said. "I'm doing it."

"You *are* a dog, aren't you?" she said. For some reason, it didn't strike Dominique as odd.

"What you just did was terribly dangerous," she said. "That was a five-dimensional phase space. If I hadn't been here the data stream could have thrown you into a feedback loop that would play in your mind forever."

She was rebuking him, but it was with such an intrigued tone that he couldn't feel shamed. It was as if he had done something very clever, and she didn't want him to know.

"I came to find you, and I did," he said.

"Your foolishness has delayed me," she said.

"I'm not going back without Aristide."

"You don't understand a thing. This is the habitat Aristide was created for. He is a symbiont that can explore its possibilities as we cannot do."

"I'll go away if he tells me to."

"You could not even perceive the space where he is now."

"Try me," he said.

She hesitated, and he sensed her curiosity, and something else — her desire for a witness. "The risk is yours," she said, then disappeared.

A data trail glowed like a fading line of fireflies, showing where she had gone. Taking a breath, like a diver going deep, Dominique followed.

He smashed through a boundary like a wall. Boisterous noise, color, texture screamed for his attention, spinning, dancing down overstimu-

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lated nerves. This time, he fought not to orient himself, not to understand, but merely to let pattern settle where it might.

Eventually, it did. He found himself in the pattern, yet able to view its totality at the same time. Here, distance and perspective did not blur detail into simplicity; faraway sights were as vivid as near ones, and he could view them from outside and inside simultaneously.

It was like a surreal landscape, if it was like anything. Above him rose a blue superlattice cliff, stepped back like shattered strata of rock. Beneath it was a glowing grove of branching symbols, crossing, tangling, complex as galaxies. He could see every detail of their structure, and the structure of their structure, regressing toward infinity, dwarfing him with detail. For a moment he felt again the terror of not knowing his own scale.

"Careful," Raspail said, grasping his shoulder.

It brought him back, grounded him, to realize he had a shoulder, a boundary where he ended and the world began. He looked at Raspail, and she too had a shape, the gift of simplicity. He realized, for all her harshness, she was not going to let him perish.

"This is the *true* fitness landscape of our species," Raspail said. "The Rinpoche and the Savants have seen only representations of it, simplified to caricature."

Everything was moving. Dominique watched vortexes of perturbation sweep across the land, and in their wake order melted into a twinkling, percolating sea. Islands rose; avalanches propagated in all directions, up as well as down.

"What am I seeing?" he asked.

"Data structures," Raspail said. "These are all visible algorithms, formulaic expressions. They have more variables than there are dimensions, so Oracle uses other sensory qualities to symbolize things."

The data structures did, in fact, excite more than one sense. In the valley ahead rose a forest of cool spearmint columns, smooth on his skin as glass; nearby a lemon-flavored prickle speared the air.

"What do the graphs mean?" he asked.

"The Savants seldom tell us," Raspail replied.

She turned around and looked across the land to where color and form ended. There, towering into the sky, was the gray wall of a massive thunderstorm. Within the turbulence, lightning flashed. Dominique drew

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back in fear, feeling as if threat were being transmitted directly into his brain without any intermediate evidence.

But as Raspail gazed at it, her representation bloomed into something intensely beautiful, shining with ardence. "That," she said, "is Aristide."

Dominique gazed at the storm. It dwarfed the landscape. "He's not human," he said.

"Not here," Raspail replied.

The storm stretched nearly from horizon to horizon ahead, blocking the way into the future. "Humanity will have to pass through him, and become transformed," Raspail said. "Disequilibrium is the creative state. Without it, nothing will ever be new."

A bolt of lightning seared the land ahead. Dominique tried to imagine himself and all the people he knew passing through a boundary shaped by the strange chemistry of Aristide's mind, amplified by Oracle into an evolutionary force.

Raspail said, "All he needs to do now is withdraw from the body, and become what you see forever."

She had lost her human shape, and become a globe of filaments, a diatom graph. She floated upward, expanding till she was the size of all Sorel, and cast a webwork shadow over the valley; then she floated toward the storm cloud. When she met it and was engulfed, she looked no larger than a pinprick.

Left alone, Dominique longed for the safety of his own body, waiting somewhere far away in the control room. He felt its pull, drawing him back, and for a moment the landscape before him turned two-dimensional and unreal. With an almost physical effort he pulled himself back. He could not run away now.

It only took a thought, and he was at the edge of the storm. It towered over him till he could see no sky. Wrapping his sense of himself tight, he plunged inside.

He was tumbling, battered, dropped by chaotic currents. Shreds of memory flew past, and a shivering rain drenched him. Too near, a thought ignited like a thunderbolt, jolting him back and leaving his fingers tingling. The roar was deafening.

A wind seized him and flung him forward, upside down, ripping at his limbs. He concentrated on his own identity for fear of losing track of it.

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There was silence. He found himself in a vast cylinder walled in by turbulent currents, like the eye of a hurricane. Ahead, against the dark glowed two symbols — diatom graphs. Raspail and Aristide. Somehow, he had reached the center of Aristide's mind, the place where structure resided.

The unfinished strands of Aristide's diatom graph were twinkling. Raspail reached out, strangely gentle, to break one off; but Aristide's graph pulled back like a live thing fearing pain.

"Please, Aristide," Raspail said. "I have to make you safe from desecration."

The globe drifted back within her reach. Dominique watched, feeling there was something he ought to do, but not knowing what. Within the storm wall he could hear a tiny voice, wailing.

She reached out quickly then, and snapped a twig of Aristide's mind. For a moment the diatom graph hung motionless. Then, with a brittle popping sound, overstrained branches began to break. Raspail cried out as she saw the structure begin to collapse. As she reached out, the walls of the storm burst in on them.

In a moment of pure instinct, Dominique made a flying leap and caught the crumbling sphere of Aristide's mind like a football, circling it with his body, trying to hold its shaky partitions together. A gust of storm bludgeoned him from one side, sending him spinning. He glimpsed Raspail's graph, caught in the storm's power. Then he centered on his own solidity, trying to track his way back to a place where he was real.

His hands were gripping the edge of the couch, tendons white. The control room was far away down a dark tunnel. He struggled toward it. Nothing felt right. The air grated like sandpaper on his cheek. The light kept dissolving like salt in water. His eyes couldn't focus together, and he saw weird double images, one close, one far.

Gradually, the broken pieces of the world came to rest in a new order, precariously balanced. A face was looking down on him. His name echoed strangely in the vault behind his eyes.

"Dominique! It's Savant Barrère. You're all right now. You're safe."

"Safe?" Dominique repeated. His thinking felt slow and viscous. He tried to sit up. "Is Aristide all right?"

The savant didn't answer. Dominique realized there were others in the room, clustered around the operator's chair behind him. Gaspard was

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there. For a moment his eyes rose and met Dominique's. He looked wasted and old.

Dominique swung his legs over the edge of the couch to stand up. "Stiff knees!" Barrère said in his ear, and it was a good thing, because his legs would have collapsed under his weight. He pushed forward.

Aristide's eyes were open and staring at the ceiling, but there was nothing behind them — no thought, no pain, no pleasure. All the lightning quickness, all the madcap energy was gone. "You saved his life," Barrère said softly. It made Dominique want to laugh. To what purpose? He might as well have saved a heap of broken glass.

Raspail lay curled in fetal position. He could not see her face, but her posture looked unlike her. He saw Gaspard holding her hand, and it was from the savant's face that he knew she had not made it back.

"Dominique, what you did was a miracle," Barrère said at his side. "No one could have done better. When you are trained, you will be the best voyant who ever lived."

He looked at her then, wondering what drove these people. In a voice that sounded like broken glass being ground underfoot he said, "To hell with Oracle. To hell with Sorel. To hell with all of you."

In the silence, he could hear little voices in his mind, repeating his words.

HIGH ATOP the tallest pinnacle in Sorel, the Rinpoche's Voice stood with a headnet on, staring at a spot in the air three feet in front of her. At her side, Gaspard Desnoyer, also in a headnet, frowned nervously at the blank air.

"They are definitely not the same," Gaspard said. "*Something* happened."

"We already knew that," Naidu answered.

The headnets showed them both the same display. The basic structure of the two diatom graphs was the same — a perfect Bernaud diagram. But the second was far more complex, as if it had grown new branches overnight.

"When was it taken?" Gaspard asked.

"Just as he was leaving Oracle. The machine monitors the voyants'

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graphs entering and leaving, but Raspail had disabled all the safety devices that might have alerted us."

At a command from Gaspard, the headnets subtracted the first pattern from the second, showing only the changes. They were thin and ghostly, filaments like spider web.

"You know what it looks like?" Gaspard said.

"I know what *I* think it looks like. What do you see?"

With a flick of his eyes Gaspard brought up another graph, one they had all seen for the first time only a day before. Its asymmetry was as unsettling now as then.

Gaspard said, "It's as if parts of Aristide's graph have become superimposed on Dominique's, or grafted to it."

The Rinpoche's Voice nodded. "It's not impossible. After all, we are dealing with a being designed to inhabit another system."

"So instead of being installed in Oracle, he became installed in Dominique?"

"An attenuated version. You notice it isn't as complex as the original."

Gaspard pulled off the headnet and balled it up in his fist. Naidu watched him with the sad, ancient eyes of a man who no longer existed.

"So Raspail's legacy continues," Gaspard said. "Another life ruined. And our hopes for a new voyant gone. We can't let him come in contact with Oracle now; even this version of Aristide's graph could contaminate the system."

"It's hard to know. It is possible that Raspail was right: a voyant too well adapted to Oracle may not see things newly. Before, Dominique was perfectly suited. Now, with this hint of maladaption, he could be even better."

Gaspard stared at her. "We can't take that chance."

"Can't we? How desperate are we?"

Gaspard's eyes narrowed. "It doesn't matter. He wants to leave. We can't make him a voyant against his will. That is, we could — Raspail proved that. But we *shouldn't*."

"It all depends on the scale on which you see things." Naidu's eyes drifted to the window, where the sheer face of Mont Chatoyer stood against the stars. "The question is, on which scale does the right path lie?

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Our algorithms can't tell us that. With Dominique's help, we might be able to find out. Perhaps some day we could map the landscape of ethics, or plot the trajectories of love."

"Not yet," Gaspard said, and his voice was husky.

Dominique came down the mountain with his pack on his back. The road was solid under his feet. The air was cool, and even the water seeping into his boots felt good. Real life was made of ordinary textures like this. He had never appreciated them before.

The unreal, detached feeling that had stayed after his adventure into Oracle was wearing off. He was glad to be rid of it, and to feel like himself again.

The bus was coming down the street, toward its stop at the hotel. He ran to meet it. No one gave him a second glance as he bought a ticket home with the cash Gaspard had loaned him.

"Call me when you get there," the savant had said, "so I know you made it."

He had looked so anxious that Dominique had said, "Don't worry, it's not hard to take a bus." Only a person with a dozen degrees would think so, he didn't add.

For a moment he'd thought there was something Gaspard wanted to tell him; but in the end the savant only said, "Your common sense is your biggest asset, Dominique. Listen to it."

"You sound like a fortune cookie," slipped out of Dominique's mouth before he could stop it. Gaspard looked startled at first, but then he smiled. The expression was so shaded with melancholy that Dominique's heart went out to him.

The bus doors sighed shut. Dominique watched out the window as they passed the bookstore on the way out of town. He felt a sad satisfaction that Gabriel was going to be free to be Gabriel, to mess up his life if that was what he wanted, without any interference from Sorel. For a moment he could see the possibilities before his brother, branching like an infinitely complex decision tree. His own future was woven into it, a filigree of choices. The landscape outside became unreal and far away; only the pattern existed. With an effort, Dominique concentrated on who he was and where he ended.

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The window had become fogged with his breath. He wiped it with his sleeve. The world, with all its mud and sunlight, was still out there, beyond the glass. All he had to do was remember that, and everything was going to be all right.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE that we're to the final issue of the year. December is always a special month — we're trying to give you one last wonderful glimpse of 1996 before we plunge headlong into 1997.

Artist **Jill Bauman** has done an excellent cover for December. It's a portrait of two children — one human and one alien — playing sweetly. But it's a deceptive cover. The story it illustrates is **Sheila Finch**'s powerful piece about language, child development, and what it means to be human. "Out of the Mouths" is one of Sheila's lingster stories (her most recent appeared in our September issue). But you don't have to have read the others to read this one. "Out of the Mouths" is one of the most unforgettable stories of the year.

Also in December, award-winning mystery writer **Ed Gorman** returns with one of the most touching stories he's written. Set in Chicago, "Yesterday's Dreams" is about a man who encounters a crying little girl in an alley, a girl with a horrifying present that leads to an even more horrifying future.

Finally, we bring you a classic sf novella. Hard sf writer **Jerry Oltion** has written a ghost in the machine story — only this ghost *is* the machine, the ultimate American machine: an Apollo space capsule. "Abandon in Place" took second in the prestigious international Universitat Politécnica de Catalunya Science Fiction contest, and is one of the best space stories we've read in a long, long time.

In 1997, we'll bring you cover stories from **Gene Wolfe** and **Robert Reed,** as well as three stories inspired by the same **Barclay Shaw** cover! We'll also have new stories from **Dale Bailey, Charles de Lint,** and **Harry Turtledove.** So make certain your subscription's current.

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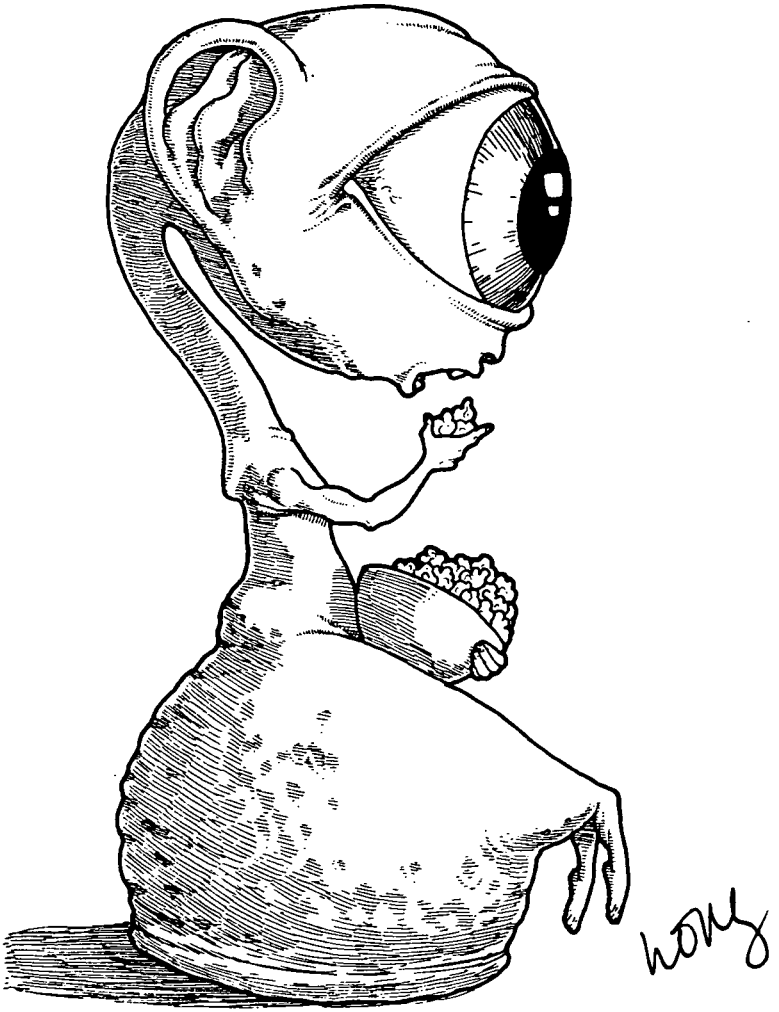

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